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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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SECTION 1

CHAPTER 1: Cornell and the Collage/Assemblage Process

> stamps, movie stars, owls, wire mesh, constellations, newspaper cuttings, compasses, glasses, astronomical charts, pipes, cork balls, swans, nymphs, dolls, maps, marbles, watch springs, thimbles, feathers, bottles, butterfly wings, metal hoops, toy blocks, sand, pictures of ballerinas, shells, jacks, parrots, sequins, twigs, music, night skies, mythological and literary figures, reproductions of renaissance portraits....

These are just some of the things employed by Joseph Cornell in the construction of his collages and boxes. The list serves to give an indication of the visual and narrative intricacy of his work: it will be the task of this chapter to begin an attempted unraveling of some of this complexity, through a closer examination of Cornell's method.

The word collage comes from the French ‘coller’, meaning ‘to glue’: it is, fundamentally, an act of attaching. Both literally and metaphorically, glue is the stuff that holds things together, things that perhaps have no business being together at all. By using glue - pasting, sealing, sticking, cementing - the artist has the power to create new objects out of elements that were previously unacquainted. In that act of creation, specific to the process of collage, there is also an inherent act of violence, destruction - objects, images, texts are torn from their original environments, where they sit comfortably and, for the most part, unobtrusively, and are reconfigured to form new contexts, which can be surprising, unexpected, even dissonant in their juxtapositions.

'Invented' (at least in the context of canonical, western high art) by Picasso in 1912 with the work *Still Life with Chair Caning,* collage - and assemblage, which is simply a three-dimensional expression of the same process - is a quintessentially modern art-making technique, being facilitated by, and intimately bound up with, the proliferation of materials that defines the nature of the world in the twentieth century. It is also a process that operates outside of the art studio, one that is fairly mundane, quotidian, repetitive and unexceptional: as Seitz (1961: 9) notes, “the placement, juxtaposition, and removal of objects within the space immediately accessible to exploration by eye

and hand is an activity with which every person's life is filled, virtually from birth until death." What made Picasso's gesture 'revolutionary', in the context of western high art, was the very ordinary, day-to-day nature of the fragments (rope and oil cloth) he incorporated into his painting - objects belonging to a very different order of things. His work, in effect, pioneered "the absorption of the activity of assembling objects into the method, *as well as the subject matter,* of painting" (Seitz 1961: 9, my italics). As we know, Picasso's subversive accomplishment had an enormous impact on subsequent artists of the century, particularly those associated with Dada and Surrealism: it gave them the freedom to represent the world through the world, by using materials which were already invested with connotative meaning. Indeed, it is this aspect of the collage technique – that it allows for the inclusion of autonomous objects from the daily life of the world into the space of an artwork – that potentially makes it a feature of both modern and post-modern art practice: modern, in that it references a post-Industrial Revolution urban environment and way of life, and post-modern in its quoting of pre-existing images and material. It is against this backdrop, in all its complexity, that one must approach the art of Cornell, who began his career in 1931 with collage/assemblage as his most fundamental technique.

Of course, Cornell's application of the technique is very different from Picasso's: though he also makes use of everyday objects, Cornell is drawn to things that he perceives as containing magic and mystery - the ability to evoke past times and lost worlds - whilst Picasso's pasted objects are an emphatic assertion of a domestic existence, a lived, physical reality. So, for example, when Cornell uses a label from a chocolate bar in his box *Chocolat Menier* of 1952 (Fig. 1), he is not only presenting it as a piece of paper, an object from the everyday world around him, but also exploiting the richness of associations that it gives rise to: the sensuality of chocolate, perhaps; the exoticism of the French text; and the link to poetry provided by the story of Emily Dickinson[2] composing a poem on the back of just such a wrapper (Ashton 1974: 91). This material fragment, pasted to the back of a box, sitting alongside other objects in a composed

[2] In the early fifties Cornell became interested in Dickinson, reading obsessively about her life and poetry and making a small group of boxes on the basis of this interest, most notably *Toward the Blue Peninsula* (Fig. 13). Indeed, the two had much in common – they were both solitary, reclusive insomniacs, continually immersed in books and filled with a romantic longing for the wider world (Solomon 1997: 214).

assemblage, does not simply stand in for the chocolate, but becomes a decidedly three-dimensional, emotionally invested object in itself, through its inclusion by Cornell. A label from a drinks bottle in a Picasso collage - *Glass and Bottle of Suze* of 1912 for example - on the other hand, has a very different function: it stands in for the bottle, making dispassionate reference only to its materiality, its tangible presence in the world. Of course, that world, the social milieu of the Parisian café, is also inferred by the label through a process of association: it is, however, the real-ness of the world that is emphasized rather than its more arcane elements. Visually, Picasso's label *means* the bottle itself: there is a direct, almost unmediated, relationship between the scrap of paper glued to the surface of the painting and the external environment from which it comes; its inclusion is part of the unsentimental Cubist project of flattening out and asserting the reality of the picture plane, representing a combination of several different views of an object on a two-dimensional surface (Golding 1959: 99). In short, the very mundane or trivial nature of these mechanically reproduced labels is reified by Picasso, transformed by Cornell.

Importantly, though, the allusive power of the objects used by Cornell is not inherent, but rather, I would suggest, a function of his method: each item has a history of being collected - searched for, happened upon, found, acquired, brought home, stored, labelled, classified - that has added to the potential for signification that it has when included in one of his works. Each object carries with it an accumulation of culturally encoded meanings, gathered on the course of its trajectory through time and space. Indeed, it is this very movement of the object, according to Appadurai, that enables an understanding of its social environment, rather than the other way around. He says:

> even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context (Appadurai 1986: 5).

By choosing things with already existing histories of belonging in the world to make his art, Cornell foregrounds the power of objects to speak about people. It is a process akin to archaeology: salvaging personal things that are no longer attached to their original households and societies; dusting them off; assigning relative importance by inferring connections between them; imagining their narratives; and finally placing them in a

vitrine, where their links to other things of human provenance are established for the viewer and their value communicated.

Inspired by the collages of Max Ernst, such as the collage-novel *La Femme 100 têtes* of 1929, Cornell started producing his own works in a similar style: cutting up and recombining reproductions of nineteenth-century engravings in unexpected ways. Indeed, Cornell even produced a set of sixteen small collages in homage to Ernst in the 1930s, *Story without a Name – for Max Ernst*, which was printed in a 1942 issue of *View,* the Surrealist magazine published in New York by the poet Charles Henri Ford. While clearly demonstrating a technical skill for cutting and pasting, Cornell's works are quite different in spirit from those of Ernst - they are without the dark and violent sexual edge that characterises the latter's collages. From the beginning, Cornell exhibited a "profound attraction to motif and sensibility in addition to the possibilities of technique" (Tashjian 1995: 249): the birds, planets, skies and seas that appear in *Story without a Name* are important as storytelling motifs, (implying the narratives of flight, discovery and childhood delight that recur throughout Cornell's oeuvre), and not just formal elements combined in unusual ways; in Ernst's work, by contrast, his mastery of technique – the seamless, shocking insertion of unexpected elements into scenes of domestic Victorian life – almost completely eclipses the content.

Some of Cornell's early collages were included in a group show called *Surréalisme* at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in 1932, along with *Glass Bell* (Fig. 2) - Cornell's first exhibited work of assemblage, in which a mannequin's hand, mounted on a base and protected by a Victorian-style glass dome, holds a collaged image of a rose with an eye at its centre. This work was the first of a great many constructions produced by Cornell - it is specifically these objects, rather than his collages and films, which form the focus of this investigation. Although all three kinds of work rely on cutting and pasting techniques, and explore similar themes, I have picked out the boxes as most pertinent to this study because they are most strongly aligned to my own artistic interests: they are constructed three-dimensionally; their diminutive scale makes them intimate, personal objects; their glass fronts confer preciousness and desirability on their

contents; and they are rich in real or imagined narrative, which makes them appear animated.

At this point, it may be useful to provide a brief inventory of Cornell's boxes for ease of reference. Hartigan (2003) divides the works into the following categories: *Early Objects; Soap Bubble Sets; Chests and Cabinets; Ballet Variants; Medici Slot Machines; Habitats; Aviaries; Dovecotes; Hotels and Observatories; Celestial Navigation Variants* and *Sand Trays and Sand Fountains.* This classification system groups the boxes quite logically according to subject matter, although there are other elements that identify works as belonging to a particular category - the *Aviary* boxes (Fig. 3), for example, have white backgrounds, and the *Dovecote* boxes (Fig. 4) are distinguished by a strongly grid-like formal structure and minimal aesthetic. Having said that, however, there is a fairly high degree of cross-over between the groups, with parrots appearing in some *Hotel* boxes (Fig. 5), and cork balls and brass hoops materializing in many of the *Celestial Navigation* works (Fig. 6): in fact, in the DVD which accompanies Hartigan's book some of the works appear in as many as four different categories. This highlights just how difficult the task of classification can become, even with an artist as accomplished in ordering and filing his source material as Cornell. It is a task also compounded by the fact that many of the boxes were left untitled: apparently, Cornell gave titles to less than half his works (Hartigan 2003: 19), so parenthetical descriptions had to be added to the many *Untitled* boxes, to make it possible to refer to them.[3]

I would agree with Ades that there is a fairly basic difference between the strategies employed by Cornell in his collages as opposed to his assemblages - in the former, the process is one of dissociation, (in line with a Surrealist sensibility); in the latter, it is one of association:

> What he comes to seek is not incongruity so much as a mysterious congruity, a thread of affinities, however intangible, rather than an illuminating spark struck from disparateness (Ades 1980: 16).

[3] The problem of categorisation seems to have plagued Cornell's work from the beginning. His first solo exhibition, held at the Julien Levy Gallery at the end of 1932, was called *Objects by Joseph Cornell: Minutiae, Glass Bells, Shadow Boxes, Coups d'Oeil, Jouets Surréalistes:* that association of his work with toys, (heightened by the fact that all his solo shows took place around Christmas), resulted in its being dismissed by many art critics of the time.

This 'thread of affinities' can perhaps be traced to Cornell's methods of collecting and storing materials to be used in his work. Even before becoming an artist, Cornell was a collector of ephemera, an "urban hunter-gatherer" (Solomon 1997: 48) - carefully filing away ticket stubs and programs from opera and ballet performances he attended, along with other interesting memorabilia of cultural life in New York in the 1920s. In the basement of his family home at 3708 Utopia Parkway, Queens, Cornell had his studio - a studio that was filled with boxes and source material files, or "dossiers", as he referred to them. All were packed full of material to be used in his assemblages, meticulously catalogued and labelled with blue paint on a whitewashed background: "Owl Cutouts", "Tinted Cordial Glasses", "Dried Pigments", "Map Tacks", "Shells/Large", "Watch Parts", "Springs", "Balls/Cork" are just some examples (Hartigan et al. 2003: 17). His was not a random and unchecked accumulation of objects, but an ordered and considered one to which he applied a refined taxonomic sensibility. It was also an extremely personal accumulation, with the activity of searching for, or fortuitously happening upon, an image or object accorded as much importance as its ownership: Solomon records that Cornell never used the objects, (such as doll's clothes and photographs), given to him by pop-artist James Rosenquist as raw material for his boxes – "it was neither the first nor the last time that someone had presumed to locate material for him, denying him the pleasure of the sacred Search" (Solomon 1997: 280).

The highly compartmentalised nature of his collecting and filing system, which is often carried through to the formal structure of the boxes, (most obviously in the *Dovecote* series, in which the stark geometry of a grid is imposed on the boxes, dividing them up into many small, individually defined units of space), is contrasted by Cornell's apparent objective of looking for correspondences between things. There seems to be a disjunction between the way the material starts out in the studio – with the classificatory boundaries rigorously maintained – and its subsequent deployment in the boxes, where things, (often as seemingly different as a watch face and a cockatoo), are shown as being fundamentally related, avatars of the same metaphysical realm. Perhaps the boundaries imposed by the labels on the shoeboxes and files function merely to impose some kind of order on the collected material: they do not constitute a threat to the existential sameness of the bits and pieces inside, which are, after all, connected by

having been collected by Cornell. His method speaks of a deliberateness that defies the surrealist goal of exploiting the 'chance encounter', even though the finished boxes, from the perspective of the viewer, do contain elements of unexpected juxtapositions: for example, the containment of a portrait of a Renaissance princess[4] with simple childhood toys behind glass marked with target lines, in the manner of a penny-arcade game from early twentieth century New York, (one of the boxes referred to as the *Medici Slot Machines* series), is, at first glance, a surprising combination of imagery (Fig. 7).

Much of Cornell's subject matter was informed by his diverse intellectual interests: he was an habitué of New York's second-hand bookshops, and collected literature on topics ranging from French symbolist poetry and the Romantic ballet, to the scientific writings of Max Planck and the spiritual treatises of Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, (he became a member of this church in the mid-1920s), - a group of interests perhaps surprising for someone with an unexceptional school record who never went to college. But whilst this reading material – his favourites included Gérard de Nerval, Novalis, Stéphane Mallarmé, Thomas de Quincey, and Emily Dickinson – provided an important backdrop to his work, Cornell was drawn to everyday objects and experiences as a basis for his artistic expression. The following two excerpts from his diary are an indication of the power of the world around him to inspire his work:

> 4/1/43
> Original inspiration for Sailor's Boxes. Bank window 59th Street. Exhibition of miscellaneous objects found in trunks of sailors (Seaman's home?) – shells, toy snake, whales' teeth, beads (exotic), a butterfly box primitively constructed passe partout with wallpaper glass broken paper cover (Cornell in Caws 1993: 99)

> Oct.17,56
> after setting sun
> rose-orange near building lavender – grey haze over Manhattan skyline – across the freight yards in twilight & across the river the El curving round almost full sweep circle into Queens Plaza – reminder of profound sense again of this benedictory beauty "the American scene" – tonight milder feeling (Cornell in Caws 1993: 220)

[4] A photostat copy of Agnolo Bronzino's *Bia di Cosimo de' Medici*.

This hints at Cornell's enduring preoccupation with making connections between things. As Solomon notes: "A compulsive cross-indexer, Cornell linked life to books, contemporary Manhattan to a vanished Paris, city pigeons to long-gone performers" (Solomon 1997: 91).

In pursuing subject matter of a particular order - chasing that 'thread of affinities' through the motifs repeated across different boxes - Cornell seems to be involved in a project of piecing together tiny fragments of something which has been irredeemably shattered. As a viewer engaged in the task of trying to follow that thread, one could begin with any one of the boxes and find elements in it that create a set of connections to all the others - indeed, the thread quickly starts becoming so unruly and tangled that it would be more productive to describe it as a web: a complex system of multiple threads that cross and re-cross each other endlessly. Take the box called *Custodian II (Silent Dedication to MM)* of 1963 (Fig. 8) as an example: it has many characteristics of the *Aviary* series of boxes - a brass chain and hoop hanging from a rod across the top, a driftwood perch, a rubber ball, a bent-back piece of wire mesh - as well as a cylinder and an astrological map, which connect it to the *Hotel* series of works. These motifs are repeated again and again across the boxes, reinforcing Cornell's main themes of travel, play, confinement and escape. Another aspect of this box that connects it to others is its title: it was made for Marilyn Monroe, one of the female movie stars who fascinated Cornell, and, like the works made for other actresses (such as Lauren Bacall and Hedy Lamarr) and ballet dancers, it has something of the reverent atmosphere of a shrine about it – it is a holy container devoted to the memory of a particular personality. What becomes clear in an analysis such as this, is that the boxes do not exist in isolation, but in a wide-ranging universe of the artist's creation.

It is as if each box, like a seventeenth-century cabinet of curiosities, is an attempt to represent an entire world, a world which encompasses aspects of all of Cornell's interests: symbolist poetry, 19th century literature, classical ballet, opera, mapmaking, childhood discovery, music, European culture.... Hammond sees the boxes as "settings where the imaginary fraternises with the real, where the dialectical resolution of the interior and exterior life takes place" (Hammond 1973: 29), but I would suggest, rather,

that a resolution is never possible: that world can never be neatly put back together, so the task is ultimately a futile one - this may be the reason why there is such a strong sense of nostalgia, of a melancholic longing for something lost, present in the boxes. This idea is taken further by Ratcliff, who writes:

> For modern minds, the very fragmented-ness of our culture takes on an enchanting aura, as each bit of imagery or thought or feeling evokes a lost (and probably fictitious) wholeness (Ratcliff 1980: 65).

The use of the word 'aura' in this context is interesting: Ratcliff assigns it to our modern culture, defined by endlessly reproduced images, which is in direct opposition to Walter Benjamin's original use of the word to describe the uniqueness of an authentic work of art. For Benjamin, the aura gets shattered during the process of mechanical reproduction, as the art object becomes detached from tradition: however, in a parallel process, the reproduction serves to reactivate the power of that object, as it brings it into the viewer's own context (Benjamin 2000: 65). It is this reactivation of power that Cornell taps into by using printed and copied images and repeating them within the same work or across several works: a prime example here being the *Medici Slot Machines* series of boxes, in which Cornell makes use of prints of Renaissance portraits of children by artists such as Bronzino and Pinturicchio - duplicating them until the pristine singularity of the original images becomes irretrievably fragmented[5].

Ironically, Cornell's method involves taking widely and cheaply available visual material and creating with it original works of art: his boxes serve to restore the preciousness of authenticity to that material, which was destroyed in the process of reproduction. The images which constitute the basic elements of Cornell's art do not lose their meanings, their authority as signs, through repetition: in fact, "to duplicate an image endlessly is often to make its spell all the more binding" (Ratcliff 1980: 64).

[5] Cornell's repetition of portrait images foreshadows pop artist Andy Warhol's use of the multiple image in his silkscreen portraits of celebrities dating from the 1960s. However, as Waldman points out, for Cornell the repeated image is a starting point of a complex development, whereas for Warhol it is itself the point (Waldman 2002: 76).

The spell that Cornell casts in his boxes makes them somewhat akin to poetry. Indeed, many commentators on his work have made the comparison - Dore Ashton, in particular, connects his artmaking method to that of a poet:

> Cornell always commenced by creating his frame, the box, and only then would drift into his procedure of association, putting in and taking out, much as a poet invests his poems with words that later may be changed or eliminated (Ashton 1974: 58).

The word Ashton uses to describe Cornell's method is aptly poetic: it is 'incantatory' - a word that neatly articulates the magic and mystery imparted by the artist to everyday, commonplace images and objects, through the act of repetition. The words that make up my list at the start of this chapter, in fact, form a kind of incantation - attaching to the enumerated objects an atmosphere of poetry, much like the boxes themselves do to the images contained inside.

An interesting question to ask here is whether that transformation of everyday objects into things with a mysterious power, through the medium of the box, is a product of Cornell's method or the associations brought to the work by each viewer. After all, collage/assemblage is the most democratic of art's processes - allowing those without the traditional skills of drawing and painting to take part: its basic method is easy to follow and appealing, as the recent explosion in the popularity of scrapbooking as a hobby illustrates. Indeed, anyone can do it: as the children's art book *Joseph Cornell: Secrets in a Box* confidently proclaims, it is possible to "Make your own Cornell Box in six easy stages!" Although aimed at a younger audience, and so necessarily simplistic, the book's assertion that a work of art on a par with one of Cornell's boxes can be made according to some kind of recipe is intriguing: one can hardly imagine a similar step-by-step guide encouraging you to "Paint your own Michelangelo ceiling in six easy stages!" The author's guide to creating a Cornell box goes like this:

> *1. Think about what to put in your box*
> Look back to your list of favorite things (an exercise given earlier in the book), and try to collect as many bits and pieces as possible. You could make a box:
> - to remind you of a fun day out (at the circus, a hike in the country, or a shopping trip)

- to show what you did on your last vacation
- about your hobbies
- about a filmstar or a pop group

2. Start collecting

Look for objects that you find interesting. Collect more things than you need and then spread them out on a table.

3. Sort out the best objects to use

Return to your collection a few days later and think what you want to include. Which pictures and items link together and will be interesting to someone else looking at your box?

4. Choose your box

A shoe box or a chocolate box works well, or you could make your own. Perhaps you will want to cover your box first - do you want this to be part of the finished item? Decorate your box (outside and inside or just inside). You could staple or stick items to the back of the box or you could make a shelf or two out of cardboard or twigs.

5. Fix your collection in the box

Place your pictures and items in the box and see how they relate to each other. Look and see how carefully Cornell's items have been positioned. Think about what you want the person looking at your box to do - should they move it around or just examine it closely. If you want items to move you will have to think carefully about how to affix them. Fix everything in place once you are happy with your work of art.

6. Give your finished box a title

And what date will you put on it, if any? The day on which you finished it or the day on which you had the best idea for what it should look like? Now you can sign it - and your Cornell box is complete! (Baverstock 2003: 28)

This step-by-step guide is extremely problematic for several reasons, even within the context of a younger, and less academically sophisticated, audience. First, it suggests that Cornell's entire set of artistic endeavours and practices can be neatly distilled into six easy steps, and in so doing it denies the rich complexity of interests that inform his work, as well as implying that both the man and his method remained unchanged over the forty or so years of his career. Second, it seems to propose that the particularities of one man's life – the sum total of his experiences of life in a certain place and over a certain period of time – can be applied universally through a set of principles to create a similar artistic result. And third, it encourages the copying of an artist's unique style to make a personal statement, rather than the development of an original individual expression.

However, although this is problematic as a 'how-to' guide, the author is fairly insightful in terms of picking out some important aspects of Cornell's method:

1. Cornell certainly did collect 'as many bits and pieces as possible' to go in his boxes, though his collecting was a life-long activity. The list of possible subjects to work with is also fairly accurate – particularly 'about a filmstar or a pop group', as (female) stars of the stage and screen constituted some of Cornell's favourite subject matter. He was also drawn to very ordinary experiences, finding in them a kind of fleeting mystery: his journey into the city on the elevated railway; the way sunlight fell on the quince tree in his back yard; flocks of urban pigeons; reflections in shop windows; young girls in the ticket booth of the movie theatre. Indeed, he writes in his diary in April 1958 "Endless marveling at the way in which routine experience suddenly becomes magically imbued and transformed with a joy too elusive to catch in words" (Cornell in Caws 1993: 235).
2. The instruction here to collect 'more than you need' is a colossal understatement of Cornell's method – his studio contained a vast amount of material, which was not randomly thrown together, but neatly contained in boxes and files and classified in terms of subject matter. Perhaps the main challenge for him was in resisting the urge to overcrowd the boxes with too much material: his later work in particular - which has a very clean, spare aesthetic - is a miracle of restraint, considering the wealth of accumulated material he had at his disposal. Ades refers to Cornell's source material collection as "an enormous underground network in which the only visible landmarks were the boxes and collages" (Ades 1980: 15), and suggests that communicating the depth of meaning that informed the works was a source of both satisfaction and regret for the artist.
3. In this step, the author instructs the children to 'return to your collection a few days later': this is also an accurate assessment of Cornell's method, as he often returned to work on his boxes many times, often over a period several of years, before completing them. Contemplation seems to have taken up more of his time than actual creation, and a sense of frustration recurs in his extensive diary notes, like this one from 1942: "a typically 'keyed-up' day – accentuated by cold and unnecessary anxiety (general)" (Cornell in Caws 1993: 99).
4. Here the author provides suggestions for the box itself – the students can either

use a pre-existing box or make one themselves. Of course, Cornell constructed most of his boxes himself, though he did standardize the dimensions to achieve a greater sense of cohesion (Hartigan 2003: 29). He also made use of 'readymade' box forms: some of his earliest assemblages were put together in tiny round cardboard pill boxes. The potential for the transformation of everyday objects into things with magic and power – a defining preoccupation of Cornell's – is in fact heightened through the use of commonly-available product packaging as a basic framework. The author also mentions 'decorating' the box and making 'a shelf or two out of cardboard or twigs' - these reference some of Cornell's strategies for preparing his boxes: coating them in layers of paint and then letting them weather in the sun or the oven; 'wallpapering' them by covering the insides with scraps of printed paper; compartmentalizing the interior spaces with wooden dividers; and using real twigs as perches for his cutout birds, projecting them forward from the backs of the boxes.

5. In this step, the students are encouraged to see how their various chosen objects 'relate to each other' in the space of their boxes: this is important, as it emphasises the care with which Cornell's objects and images are assembled in his works. There is also the suggestion here that a box can be made with movable elements that stimulate an interaction with the viewer – a strategy often employed by Cornell, (the majority of his boxes contain things that are unfixed – balls, marbles, scraps of paper, sand, hoops, chains, etc.).
6. The final step is to 'Give your finished box a title' – something which Cornell often failed to do. The interesting thing here is how to date the box, with 'the day on which you finished it or the day on which you had the best idea for what it should look like?': this shows the author's appreciation for the dimension of time in Cornell's works – indeed, his works are often dated with a time period rather than just a single year, such as 1946-48.

What this exercise tries do to is sum up the entirety of an artist's life and work and influences, and distill them into a practical formula for making art – a task that is ultimately a futile and undesirable one. The originality and value of art in general would be severely compromised if indeed something akin to one of Cornell's boxes could be

made in “six easy stages!”, in an expedient ‘assemblage by numbers’ process. This exceedingly reductionist attempt to turn the artist’s unique poetry into a widely applicable formula can perhaps be compared with the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the orderly storage and classification of working materials in Cornell’s basement studio, and their metamorphosis into something entirely different through the box-making process.

As I have tried to show in this chapter, Cornell’s artmaking method is not easily quantifiable: it involved, rather, a complex concatenation of objects, images, themes, stories, ideas and associations to create small, intensely personal works of art, that nevertheless imply an infinite universality. What Baverstock fails to encapsulate in her six-step programme is the unique alchemical process through which Cornell found the spark of fantasy in the everyday, and transformed the ordinary into the magical. Perhaps his artistic quest is best summed up by this sentiment from the poet Jorge Luiz Borges:

> There is nothing in the world that is not mysterious, but the mystery is more evident in certain things than in others: in the sea, in the eyes of the elders, in the color yellow and in music (Borges 1984: 28).

CHAPTER 2: The implications of the box format in Cornell's constructions

> I am looking at a photograph of a box. It is a rectangular box, with five sides made of wood - old, honey-coloured wood with darker marks on it - and the sixth of glass, so that you can see inside it. The inside of the box, which is fairly shallow, is covered with fragments of paper: mostly pieces of text from a French newspaper, but also some scraps of floral wallpaper, parts of old maps, and a postage stamp from Portugal. At the centre is an engraving of a white cockatoo perched on a section of branch, cut out and mounted onto a thick piece of wood, so that it stands out from the background. Behind the bird, the word "L'Economiste" is legible, printed in much larger letters than the other fragments of text that line the inside of the box. Below the bird is another piece of wood, rounded and with a clear grain pattern of parallel lines, also jutting out from the flat background. Close to the top edge of the box, running from one side to the other, is a thin round metal bar, from which a round metal hoop hangs, free to move along it. A thin, dark green length of cord is tied to the hoop and hangs all the way down the length of the box, on the right side of the cockatoo, and dangles on the floor. Beside it on the floor of the box is a folded up piece of paper with handwritten words on it, and a small cork ball with a red wooden dowel pushed through its centre to form an axis - neither of these two items is fixed to the bottom of the box. The box is very muted in colour, though the predominant browns and off-whites of the wood and yellowed pieces of paper are contrasted by three abstract shapes of solid black, the dark string, and the two small points of red on either side of the cork ball.

I have chosen to begin here with my own description of one of Cornell's box constructions - *A Parrot for Juan Gris*, made in 1953/4 (Fig. 9) - because it quite neatly highlights some of the issues to be discussed in this chapter, for which I will be using Susan Stewart's book *On Longing* as the principal theoretical backdrop. What immediately becomes clear when trying to describe the artwork is the inadequacy of language to do the job: there is the sense that no matter how detailed the verbal picture you paint, it will never approximate the impression provided by a visual representation of or, even more tellingly, the thing itself. What also comes to mind is that the work of verbal description might never be complete - in stark contrast to the clearly delimited and contained space of the boxed artwork. These are just some of the ideas that I will try to tease out in this chapter, keeping in mind that it is the box itself, as used by Cornell, that is the focus of the investigation: how it acts as a framing device, separating inside from outside; how it works to contain the elements of the assemblage; how it contributes to the sense of narrative created by those elements; and what the implications of these things might be for the task of interpretation.

As Michael Baxandall has pointed out, any description of a work of art, like mine above, is also, automatically and inescapably, an interpretation: the act of looking involves the mind as well as the eye, "what one offers in a description is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture" (Baxandall 1991: 5). This is particularly pertinent to a study of Cornell's boxes, because they contain objects from the outside world that immediately trigger a set of associations in the mind of the viewer - suggesting action rather than a stasis which could satisfactorily be described. Even in my very pedestrian verbal description of a Cornell box, which captures only a fraction of the visual richness of the work itself, there are words like 'cockatoo', 'handwritten', 'red', and 'postage stamp' which have connotative meanings that extend far beyond a physical description.

Indeed, the kinds of adjectives most commonly evoked among people writing about Cornell's work, including whimsical, romantic, lyrical, playful, enchanting, are an indication of the wealth and complexity of associative significance attached to his boxes, which precludes any interpretations or readings of the work based simply on formal considerations. The boxes seem to inspire some fairly poetic responses - here is one example, from a book I came across called “The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)”, containing fanciful stories of imaginary hotels sparked off by some of Cornell's boxes, which provides a nice contrast to my own description:

> At the very heart of the Grand Hotel Penny Arcade, encased in blue glass and pale as porcelain, floats a sleeping princess, gracefully coiling and uncoiling, clothed only in her own purity, her eyes open but unseeing. Her slow liquid movements, contained in an architecture that is both formal and evocative, are those of a sleepwalker: elaborate, balletic, silent, unrelated to her austere geometric surroundings. (Coover 2002: 12)

Although this is a fiction constructed by the author, it is a good illustration of the latent narrative present in each of the boxes, of the power of signification of the objects they contain. It is also evidence of the paradox presented by Cornell's boxes: while serving as containers - physically limited spaces - they in fact set off an unbounded and open-ended cascade of associations. As one commentator neatly puts it, "Cornell could take you into the universe in the space of a thimble" (Lehrman in Hartigan 2003: 147).

Whilst those associations will, of course, vary widely from viewer to viewer, according to personal experience, there are several narrative strands running through groups of boxes: the romance of the ballet and of voyages of discovery; childhood play; captivity; and the freedom of flight. In some instances, these strands become distilled in a box with a very particular story – such as *Toward the Blue Peninsula (for Emily Dickinson)*, (Fig. 13), in which the abstract motifs of confinement, yearning and liberty become anchored to the specific subject of Emily Dickinson's life and poetry – but mostly they remain fairly generalised, and are quite simply evoked by materials like metal hoops, wire mesh and cork balls. These thematic links, or 'image-chains' as Carter Ratcliff (1980) calls them, serve to reinforce Cornell's major preoccupations, and connect the artworks to each other and the broader world outside them: a connection made even more strongly through the use of scavenged, second-hand materials already imbued with a trace of the world. So, when confronted with one of his boxes, the viewer is able to glimpse not only a single facet of Cornell's constructed universe, but the universe itself. There seem to be various layers of significance operating at once in Cornell's boxes - trying to decode them, find their meaning/s, might be compared to looking through a microscope. As Stewart notes, speaking of the tableau:

> That the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life ... is a constant daydream that the miniature presents. This is the daydream of the microscope: the daydream of life inside life, of significance multiplied infinitely *within* significance (Stewart 1984: 54).

What is particularly interesting here is that, through her language, Stewart suggests that it is the world of things, rather than the viewer, that has agency. In fact, it is the acts of looking, thinking about, imagining that create narrative from a tableau - you have to look into the microscope to see the things within things - but the objects in Cornell's boxes are so beguiling that there seems to be no question that it is they themselves "who" are telling the stories. As Potts concedes:

> while we know that meanings do not arise spontaneously out of physical objects, that they only seem to do so because of codes to which we are so attuned that we do not notice their operations, the compulsion to talk as if this were the case never goes away (Potts 1996: 17).

It is difficult to avoid the personalization of such inanimate things: because they are small, intimate, often associated with childhood play, and presented as though in a miniature theatre, they can easily be assigned a story-telling voice by the viewer. As Olalquiaga suggests:

> Once invested with such a degree of subjectivity, things gain a cultural life of their own - they can no longer be distinguished as separate entities, but rather constitute in themselves an extension of the human experience, becoming fully personalized (Olalquiaga 1998: 288).

There is something quite fascinating about the discovery of meanings usually hidden from view - this is wonderfully conveyed in an excerpt from the seventeenth-century journal of microscope-gazer Robert Hooke:

> April 22 1663, Leeches in Vinegar. Bluish Mold on Leather; April 29th. A Mine of Diamonds in Flint. Spider with Six Eyes; May 6th, Female and Male Gnats; May 20th, Head of Ant. Fly like a Gnat. Point of a Needle; May 27th, Pores in petrified wood. Male Gnat; June 10th, Sage-Leaves appearing not to have cavities; July 8th, Edge of a Razor. Five Taffeta Ribbons. Millipede; July 16th, Fine Lawn. Gilt edge of Venice Paper; August 5th, Honeycomb Sea-weed. Teeth of a Snail. Plant growing on Rose-Leaves (Hooke cited in Stewart 1984: 40).

This list of objects under scrutiny lends a poetic tenor to items which are, for the most part, everyday things commonly encountered. This may be a result of the unexpected way in which the articles are juxtaposed here - suddenly there is some kind of affinity created between an insect and a diamond that wasn't apparent before. Again, the list becomes an incantation: imparting a kind of magic to its objects; making them, however different they may be, belong to the same category. What the microscope provides is a whole new way of looking, and access to a level of significance beyond what might be conveyed by the surface of an object. This impression is also what Cornell communicates in his boxes - here is an indication of that from a diary entry from 1946:

> Tiny beads of rain nestling in cupped green leaves - some larger resembling quicksilver in their substance and movement and shape but then the discovery that they were miniature crystal balls reflecting the sky (Cornell in Caws 1993: 130).

What is quite clear here is Cornell's sense of wonder at the world, and the delight in the discovery of an association between one thing and another: that a rain drop can so easily hold within it the implication of a boundless universe is what makes the boxes so rich. It is, in fact, that very idea of 'holding within', of encapsulation of

thoughts/feelings/stories - captured in physical fragments and pictorial representations - that defines Cornell's boxes. For what is a box but a vessel, a receptacle, an enclosure: something constructed for the sole purpose of containing something else; a material boundary that creates a space to be occupied; a neatly prescribed delineation that separates inside from outside? It is, importantly, also something which isolates inside from outside, (enclosure carries with it the implication of exclosure), and thereby enables a set of relations to be established within the space distinct from those relations that obtain outside the box.

The isolation of the space of the box, its detachment from a physical reality governed by a particular set of rules, could, in fact, be described as a kind of liminality, in Victor Turner's (1967) sense: a marginal, ambiguous, in-between space that marks a transition from one state to another, accompanied by ritual and symbolism that define the space as separate from 'normal' existence. It may be difficult to imagine that theory - developed to describe people in societies - applied to inanimate objects[6], but Cornell's boxes do not seem to be all that inanimate: they are activated by the physical traces of their construction, and the metaphysical chains of association provided by each viewer. So, although they are static material objects, they contain within them the implication of movement, just as a museum display case with a few artefacts inside can invoke an entire community and way of life. The difference, of course, is that the museum display labels its contents according to strict scientific principles of categorisation - it has a certain kind of authority; it aims to lead you to an objective truth about the world. Cornell's boxes make suggestions to the viewer, but the worlds that they reference are entirely subjective. Their liminality stems from the potential that they contain to transform the individual observer's perception of their significance: but, like one of those jewellery boxes which reveals a dancing ballerina when opened, the participation of the observer is required to bring that potential to life. In being activated in this way, they can be seen as transitional spaces, and their frames as important markers of their separation from everyday life. Of course, that separation is not complete, because of the sixth side of the box. The glass is a boundary, but also allows access to the world inside:

[6] In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas does in fact refer to material objects: she discusses the problematic nature of bodily fluids that transgress the boundary of the skin, so and have to be dealt with ritually; and things that are anomalous, which do not fit neatly into defined categories, such as the animals that are the subject of the Old Testament abominations of Leviticus.

it is a border, appropriately transparent, but transgressed only with some degree of danger, perhaps both physically and psychically. This has several interesting implications, which will be explored further in the following chapter: most important here, perhaps, is that the glass creates an enclosed space that is nevertheless visually accessible, turning the box into a theatrical stage on which its motifs and themes, and the relationships between its objects, can be played out, and the associations of each viewer projected. The box as a container – both physical and metaphysical – is strongly asserted, rather than implied, as it is by easel painting, or denied, as it is by the Cubist collages of Picasso and Braque. Neither a useful object nor an attempt to represent the world as it is perceived, the Cornell box exists in a decidedly marginal space.

The boxes present us with a strong sense of narrative, but it is often only a sense: stimulated by what we can see, which is just a small fragment, a trace, of a much larger context created by Cornell, the narrative is generated in each viewer by a complex web of association and interpretation. Taking a semiotic approach, (specifically, the model proposed by Peirce), the art work can be described as a sign: it "has no meaning without an audience willing to interpret what this meaning might be" (Potts 1996: 18). Importantly, though, this act of interpretation is not something finite: it is not a task whose outcome is strictly defined, a process whereby several strands of thought converge neatly into an "a-ha!" moment of understanding meaning. What might be conveyed to me in looking at *A Parrot for Juan Gris*, the box I described at the start of this chapter, is more an impression than a definitive answer - the exotic tropicality of the cockatoo, the European sensibility of the French newspaper clippings, the playfulness of the hoop and the ball, the Cubist art invoked by the name in the title, the longing implied by the handwritten note. That note, in fact, is probably the most powerful indicator of narrative: intensely personal, the handwriting constitutes the physical trace in the world of the interiority of its human author; it is a recording of events/thoughts/feelings from an entirely subjective point of view; it has neither the authority nor anonymity of a typewritten text.

At this point, it would perhaps be useful to analyse *A Parrot for Juan Gris* more thoroughly, in order to gain a better understanding of how Cornell creates or exploits

correspondences between things in his boxes, and how he makes use of association to weave the narratives that run through them. Cornell made a series of boxes dedicated to the Cubist painter – his only works made in homage to another artist – after coming across one of his paintings, *Figure Seated in a Café* (1914), in a gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in 1953. The fifteen or so boxes, which vary only slightly in detail, are all inhabited by a single white cockatoo on a perch, and wallpapered on the inside with black paper cutouts of abstract geometric shapes and newspaper text: the inspiration for these boxes, he later wrote, was "purely a human reaction to a particular painting at the Janis Gallery – a man reading a newspaper at a café table covered almost by his reading matter" (Cornell in Solomon 1997: 263). As with most of the historical, literary and artistic characters that he "collected", Cornell was interested as much in the life of Juan Gris as in his art, perhaps being drawn by his status as a marginal figure: although an important contributor to the Cubist movement, Gris was overshadowed by its other leaders, Braque and Picasso, and he died at a young age after battling poverty and severe depression. With his more methodical and intellectual approach to Cubism (Golding 1959: 97)[7], Gris was also, perhaps, a kindred spirit of Cornell's: both of them "sought to extract a measured poetry from ordinary things" (Solomon 1997: 263). The collaged interiors of the *Juan Gris* boxes, which are quite distinct from the fairly stark white of the other *Aviary* works, are clearly a reference to the painter's Cubist style and technique, and maybe also to his Parisian studio environment, (the fragments of text in *A Parrot for Juan Gris* are from French newspapers). The white cockatoo, occupant of this Cubist habitat, might be read as Gris himself, although Cornell implies through his diaries that the bird is a stand-in for nineteenth-century Spanish diva Maria Malibran: her presence in the box is meant to bring music to the artist, and offer him an escape from his difficult life (Solomon 1997: 264).

What this analysis begins to do is unravel some of the complexity of association informing Cornell's working method: in deciphering how an exotic bird becomes connected to a Cubist painter by means of a nineteenth-century diva, this discussion brings us to a fuller understanding of his creative process. Clearly, the material that gets placed in a box is only a touchstone, a small gateway into the mass of historical and

[7] Interestingly, Cornell records in his diary spending Christmas Eve of 1959 reading this very book on Cubism by John Golding (Solomon 1997: 266).

anecdotal information that stands behind it. Indeed, the power of many of Cornell's boxes comes from a formal simplicity which nevertheless contains a wealth of implication: in *Untitled (Homage to Blériot)* (Fig. 10), for example, a spiral of coiled-up wire is bursting with potential energy; *The Crystal Palace* (Fig. 11) starkly evokes a presence through a representation of an empty cage; the multitude of small drawers that accompany the parrot in *Untitled (Aviary Parrot Box with Drawers)* (Fig. 12) prompts us to imagine what could conceivably be inside. In fact, there is nothing inside those drawers - as a tour of the box on the DVD reveals - but there does not have to be: their physical emptiness contains a sense of possibility that, while abstract and ephemeral, nevertheless constitutes content. The boxes may be understood as remnants of a time and place that we no longer have access to, archaeological artefacts that synecdochically infer entire societies - their interpretation is contingent rather than absolute. Or, as Stewart puts it:

> the miniature is often a material allusion to a text which is no longer available to us, or which, because of its fictiveness, never *was* available to us except through a second-order fictive world (Stewart 1984: 60).

The function of separation from the space of lived reality that the box performs also has a temporal aspect. Unaffected by the exterior passing of time, the box preserves what it contains and becomes a site of reverie: in it, time is compressed, underlining the interiority of the viewing subject and creating a "private time" (Stewart 1984: 66). Even in the several of Cornell's boxes which have unfixed elements - balls that can roll down chutes, sand that can fill and empty broken glasses, hoops that can move along rods, in a subtle reconfiguration of the inside of the box prompted by its handling - time, as we experience it, is suspended. Time in the boxes is governed by a different set of rules: they work, perhaps, like the hypothetical experiment in quantum physics known as ‘Schrödinger's Cat’ - containing many parallel and competing possible interpretations concurrently, until one of them is activated within an individual person looking at the box (for a description of the experiment, see Gribbin 1995: 19). This prompts the notion that, until one actively looks through the glass side of the box, its contents remain unknown.

The internal time of reverie is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in the boxes that contain their own windows looking onto outside skies, which are either collaged reproductions or painted representations by Cornell himself, (as in many of the *Observatory* boxes, where night skies are rendered in black or dark blue with splatters of white paint). Paradoxically, though they indicate a way out, a breach of the confines of the box, a means of escaping to a world outside, they in fact profoundly increase the sense of interiority already established through the use of the box format. *"Toward the Blue Peninsula" (for Emily Dickinson)* (Fig. 13), for example, practically reverberates with feelings of loss and yearning - the small window frame within the larger box frame takes the viewer inexorably further inside him/herself, even whilst an elated sense of freedom is created by the hole in the restraining wire mesh. This is a paradox repeated in different aspects of the boxes: their physical and temporal stasis is contradicted, or perhaps balanced by, a divergent and exponential torrent of associations that they give rise to. Whilst materially bound, their meanings are infinite. They are like suspended animations, glass-globe souvenirs, single frames in a film - always implying movement while standing still. Meaning, in the world of Cornell's box constructions, is latent rather than manifest.

Having said that, however, I am mindful of the fact that in suggesting that the boxes contain an infinite number of possible interpretations, I am in fact making a statement of limited usefulness. The danger in attaching too much information to a work is that it may be rendered meaningless in the process. As Tom Robbins so elegantly puts it:

> "A woodpecker's movement around a tree trunk defines a perfect spiral. To connect the hoppity helix of the woodpecker to the macrocosmic spiral of our stellar system or to the microcosmic spiral of the DNA molecule or, for that matter, to the hundreds of natural spirals in between – snail shells, crowns of daisies and sunflowers, fingerprints, cyclones, etc. – may be assigning to geometry more meaning than the mundane can abide. Suffice to say that a woodpecker is first on one side of a tree and then the other; disappearing, then reappearing at a point slightly higher up the trunk." (Robbins 1980: 147)

CHAPTER 3: The Sixth Side of the Box

In his later life, after the deaths of his cerebral palsied brother Robert and mother Helen, (for whom he had provided and cared for his entire adult life), in the mid-1960s, Joseph Cornell seems to have stopped making boxes altogether, choosing instead to focus on collage once again. These later works, however, are quite different from his early experiments with the medium in the 1930s - which are clearly indebted, both stylistically and technically, to the collages of Max Ernst – and express an interest in popular culture combined with some of the themes and imagery explored over and over again in his box constructions. Whilst the quality of these collages is varied – the *Penny Arcade* series is particularly rich, whilst the series Cornell made in remembrance of his brother, which incorporated many of Robert's child-like drawings, was panned by the critics for its excessive sentimentality – I would agree with Solomon that they are, in general, much less gratifying than the boxes: they "don't inhabit the same poetically enclosed space" (Solomon 1997: 344). What separates the boxes from the collages, even more than the several centimeters of depth that add a third dimension, is the presence of the pane of glass: it is the implications of this glass, forming the sixth side of every box, which will be the focus of investigation in this chapter.

The first of these implications has to do with the act of looking: even though Cornell never used material or images of a sexually explicit nature in his boxes – (indeed, he rejected the 'dark side' of Surrealism, characterised by an undisguised and often violent sexual content) - the effect of the glass front is to turn the viewer in to some kind of voyeur, peering into the closed-off spaces and catching a secret thrill from the magic world displayed inside. There are several aspects of the boxes that seem to heighten that sense of voyeurism, of an illicit watching: their presentation as a kind of theatre; their narrative content; their diminutive size; their dream-like qualities; the functions of preservation and containment that they perform.

It hardly requires a leap of imagination to see the boxes as little theatres – they are framed-off, separated from the world of lived reality, containing a constructed setting for a drama to unfold. What they signal, through their arcane configurations of mostly

commonplace found objects, is a space for the imagination, distinct from our physical existence, where we are encouraged to look, see, and engage in a fantasy world, (partly of our own making, and partly of Cornell's), through the suspension of disbelief. Although basically static – completed as artworks once the glass has been put in place – that fantasy enclosed in the circumscribed space of the box is reactivated over and over again by each individual viewer taking a look inside. In each viewing, the content of the box is made present once again to the viewer. As Myers puts it:

> The *actuality* of an experience was Cornell's first concern; each work must *exist* as the viewer regards the box or collage in front of him. Since much of what the artist is alluding to occurred in the past or outside chronological time, the images must project their real-ness and present-ness. The shadow box is a perfect medium for such a notion: it is like a little theatre, it is three-dimensional, the objects within the proscenium are actual "props" and the light in which they are bathed, theatrical (Myers 1975: 35).

It is interesting that the author here assigns agency to the inanimate objects or images within the boxes – it becomes their task to stimulate a reaction, their role in the drama is decidedly active. As discussed in the previous chapter, it seems almost impossible to talk about Cornell's boxes without giving the objects they contain the very human attributes of voices and actions. In this context that attribution is quite pertinent, for, although it is an act of looking initiated by the viewer, voyeurism seems to be a particularly passive activity - excitement is received through a second-order experience of observation of others, rather than direct participation. Here again, the store windows that provided so much inspiration for Cornell come to mind: by offering up so many alluring objects to the consumer - creating a stage on which desire is played out - they are engaged in a seduction that relies on the voyeuristic gaze for its success.

Allied to the notion of the box as a theatre is that of narrative – the metaphysical content that inhabits the framed physical space. In each of his boxes, Cornell creates, through juxtaposition, a particular dialogue between the objects that occupy it: as Caws describes, "he would set up an unlikely encounter and frame it in wood and glass as if in a theater of objects" (Caws 1997: 201). The fact that one object encounters another within the framed-off space is what strikes the spark of the narrative; the fact that those encounters are 'unlikely' situates Cornell's work firmly within the Surrealist sensibility. In

the majority of the boxes, the narrative is ephemeral and the viewer has to imagine or invent the plot, whilst in some the artist provides the entire story, in the form of text imbedded in the box. The most obvious example of this is in *Taglioni's Jewel Casket* of 1940 (Fig. 14), inspired by an anecdote told of the famous nineteenth-century ballerina, which appeared in a book called *An Englishman in Paris* by Albert D. Vandam, published in 1892 (Waldman 2002: 58). The box, which takes the form of a jewellery box rather than the glass-fronted box more commonly associated with Cornell, is lined with lush brown velvet and contains a dime-store rhinestone necklace and twelve glass cubes arranged in a grid. On the inside lid a typewritten text relates the story:

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

Here the rich narrative content supplied by Cornell through the medium of text is contrasted by the relatively spare physical contents of the box, (in most of the boxes it is the contents alone that have to do the work of hinting at or implying the story), which visually reinforce the story: the box, with its velvet lining, becomes a jewel casket, containing a sparkling necklace as well as the blocks of artificial ice alluded to in the text.

As one becomes more familiar with Cornell's oeuvre, it is clear that, as much as the boxes are materially isolated from one another, and have their own distinct stories to tell, they are also connected by a kind of meta-narrative that unites some of the artist's main preoccupations: flight, play, navigation, discovery, adventure, stardom. The story of Marie Taglioni is rich in individual detail but also serves to link this box to other works, through its relationship to some of these key themes: the dancer, "that enchanting creature", can be associated with the exotic birds inhabiting the *Aviary* series; the "starlit heavens" are referenced in every *Observatory* box. Again, the sense

of narrative pervading the boxes, the fragments and strands of stories that get picked up across many different works, intensifies the voyeuristic experience of the viewer.

The size of the boxes, too, adds something to the element of voyeurism. They are small things, their gestures are confined, intimate – their scale "demands a private contemplation from the viewer and at the same time suggests something precious, concentrated, unique" (Anderson 1971: 52). And while their smallness nevertheless is able to "imply the Cosmos" (Myers 1975: 34), it also forces a narrowing of focus, a constriction in the act of viewing that is comparable to that required in observing a peepshow, or looking through a microscope, telescope or kaleidoscope. The analogy of a peepshow here is especially pertinent, as it highlights the illicit nature of voyeurism – it is a watching that is unauthorized, the transgression of a private boundary, the violation of a space that is meant to be hidden from view. Indeed, the synonyms of the word 'peep' provided by the Collins Thesaurus – "look from hiding, look surreptitiously, peek, peer, sneak a look, spy, steal a look" – all point to a situation where the looking is clearly not sanctioned.

Many of the boxes, however, also make reference to children's games - an association which, I find, sits in productive discomfit alongside that of voyeurism. In *Medici Princess* of 1952 (Fig. 7), for example, the glass divides up the surface of the box with a series of sight lines, clearly alluding to the penny arcade games, which were such a rich source of imagery for Cornell. There are also other indicators of childhood play in the box - the subject is a young girl surrounded by toys such as cubes, balls and hoops, which at the most superficial level imply innocence. However, that theme of innocent play is disrupted by an equally strong suggestion of surveillance and potential violence: the subject is being looked at through glass that is tinted blue and inscribed with lines that mark her as a target. The tension created here between the two sets of connotations, which makes the work particularly successful, is a product of the glass, which in this case is not so much a transparent barrier, (protecting the contents of the box), but rather a kind of lens or spy-glass, focusing a sinister attention on the subject inside.

Another aspect of the boxes that contributes to the sense of voyeurism, is their similarity to the feelings evoked by dreams: that these small, enclosed spaces may be representations of someone's dream landscapes provokes a sense of unease that what is being looked at is an intensely private site of reverie. As Ashbery comments:

> Cornell's boxes embody the substance of dreams so powerfully that it seems that these eminently palpable bits of wood, cloth, glass and metal must vanish the next moment, as when the atmosphere of a dream becomes so intensely realistic that you know you are about to wake up (Ashbery 1967: 57).

Importantly, the power of a dream is dependent on the closure provided by waking up (Solomon 1997: 344) – that same sense of closure exists in the sealed-off, autonomous space of the box. There is a strong impulse to equate the contents of the boxes with the stuff of nocturnal imaginings: what results from the techniques of collage and assemblage is often an irrationality that may only be satisfactorily explained by reference to the world of the subconscious. That interpretation would seem to be appropriate in Cornell's case, as his diaries contain many notations of his own dream experiences, such as this one:

> Sun. A.M. 10/19/58
> too disturbed yesterday to note dream of which a couple of details lingered – too nebulous to ever do much about – still a single touch worth noting – a troupe of ballet dancers doing practice, professionals – all parts of dream unconnected and no real warmth – alone in noting a particular ballerina (acrobatics) and wanting to compliment which could have been done through friend – was with Charles Henri Ford in this and other part – on water sailing – going past old house in Nyack – also somewhere along way place where I lived (though unfamiliar) and thinking of Robert and not being able to stop by and greet (Cornell in Caws 1993: 246).

However, although the boxes resonate with an atmosphere consistent with a dream state, it would be highly suspect to interpret Cornell's process of artmaking in terms of a relationship to dreaming: his awareness of, and sensitivity to, his own subconscious mind, as revealed through dreams, is not an indication that he exploited that state when producing work, as was the goal of many of the Surrealists, (who routinely experimented with things such as automatic writing and hypnosis to attempt an art that was purely an expression of the subconscious). Cornell himself was concerned about his

process being misrepresented, and reacted to an article published in *Harper's Bazaar* , prior to the landmark show "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936, by writing to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the museum's director: " The article in 'Harper's Bazaar' said that I 'objectify' instead of paint," he wrote, "that if I dream of sticking a needle through a wooden ball, when I awake, that is what I do" (Cornell in Tashjian 1995: 248).

The problematic nature of a psychoanalytic interpretation is revealed here, although there are several aspects of Freudian dream theory that could contribute to an overall understanding of Cornell's work. Making a distinction between the latent and manifest content of the dream, Freud notes that a large-scale work of condensation occurs from one to the other: "The dream is scant, paltry, laconic in comparison to the range and abundance of the dream-thoughts" (Freud 1999: 212). Discussing the translation of signs in the dream into meaning, he also states that "we would obviously be misled if we were to read these signs according to their pictorial value and not according to their referentiality as signs" (Freud 1999: 211). My understanding of this theory, at a very basic level, is that our subconscious minds are densely packed with a vast range of thoughts, images, experiences, associations and emotions; what appears in our dreams, by contrast, is only a tiny fraction of such copiousness, although the entirety of that richness is implied through dream imagery which is symbolically encoded. While I would hardly describe his work as 'scant' or 'paltry', or suggest that we disregard its 'pictorial value', these two quotes have resonance when applied to a Cornell box: what ends up inhabiting that frame is a physical distillation of a complex and wide-ranging process; a fraction of a much larger universe to which it may make only oblique reference; a touchstone for an unbounded web of associations. Indeed, considered against the backdrop of Freudian psychoanalysis, with its addition of yet another layer of meaning, the connotations of voyeurism provoked by the glass become more pertinent.

The last aspect of the boxes to be considered in this light is that of their containment: referencing a long tradition of the display of precious natural and man-made wonders in cabinets of curiosities and museum vitrines, the glass allows us to look at - to devour with our eyes - what is inside, while protecting those contents from our physical

presence. Although freely allowing visual access through its transparency, the glass is an effective barrier to the other senses – its function is one of preservation. And what it preserves is not only the actual bits and pieces inside, but also the feelings they engender and the histories they reference – Hughes talks about Cornell's imagining of an idealised Europe, and how "his boxes preserve it like microscope slides" (Hughes 1976: 41). The analogy here of the instrument of scientific observation, and the specimens suspended in a glass boundary, is fortuitous – it highlights the probing nature of our gaze, and also takes us back to the idea, discussed above, of the glass marked as a target, a lens through which we observe a subject. Doing its job of preservation, the glass in Cornell's boxes protects the contents from the passage of time, decay and dust - that "cumbersome residue that taints what it touches and must be eradicated...a persistent contamination exuded by death onto the world of the living" (Olalquiaga 1998: 91).

The desire to protect people or objects or places from the ravages of time is certainly behind the impulse to house things in glass: souvenir paperweights, snow globes and stuffed birds under bell jars are all expressions of this nostalgic yearning for an existence outside of time – even watches and clocks, the instruments that measure time, are sealed off from its actual passage by a glass case. What happens if the glass gets broken? Then the carefully delineated boundary between inside and outside is breached, the border transgressed, and the threat of pollution, in Mary Douglas' (1966) sense of the term, is made manifest. In Cornell's *Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery* of 1943 (Fig. 15) just such a rupture has occurred: the glass has been broken – as if by a bullet, with several long cracks radiating out from a central, jagged hole – and the parrots inside are in danger and spattered with paint. The contrast between this box and the others in the *Aviary* series is pronounced: here the innocence of target shooting in a penny arcade game is transformed violently into an atmosphere of fear, pain and death that is intensely disquieting. Whilst in most cases the physical existence of the glass is downplayed – its presence denied by its transparency – in this work the power of the glass is strongly asserted. In light of this discussion, the broken glass here begs an interesting question: what implication does the violation of the boundary have for the viewing subject, the voyeur? Once the barrier that protects both the looker and the

looked-at is destroyed, the same power relations no longer obtain – the gaze is no longer something mediated, and perhaps becomes something irredeemably uncomfortable. The shattered glass also has consequences for the reflection of the viewer fleetingly held on its surface: it becomes severely fragmented, disjointed, sharp-edged.

Although the focus of the investigation here has so far been on voyeurism as it relates to the viewer of Cornell's work, there is another aspect to it worth exploring: the artist's own existence as a voyeur. As Caws suggests, "Joseph Cornell may well have been the truest, liveliest, most devoted voyeur of them all" (Caws 1993: 35), and indeed many of his boxes – particularly those devoted to female subjects – are strong indications of this desire to watch. Solomon describes him as "a rapt birdwatcher" deriving enormous pleasure from his looking, "staring at cheerleaders and shop girls as if they were exotic species and their clothing beautiful plumage" (Solomon 1997: 178). His diaries are filled with evidence of an obsessive tendency to look at young girls: notations of these 'sightings' – both fleeting glimpses of strangers on the street and more sustained encounters with acquaintances, such as tellers at the movie theatre or waitresses at the cafés he frequented – document in fine detail the appearance of these objects of his looking. Here are just two examples:

> NY CITY May 18, 1947
> On the downtown Madison Ave. bus a girl about eight years of age got on and gradually moved to back and sat down on a side seat. Plain black dress flowered trimming white thin strip around neck and down centre of dress. She had a book under her arm, "Little Women" and traveling alone. Alert, quiet, assured and modest (brown hair, a countenance not pronouncedly pretty but of a manner always evoking a sadness that one will only see her for a moment or so and then never again.) (A beautiful innocence.) (Cornell in Caws 1993: 143).
>
> 9/23/58
> just now the teener[8] – a long moving picture portrait – seen crossing Roosevelt + Main – autumn sunlight – went into Woolworth – wandered all over store daydream shopping without buying – hair (chestnut) worn down back – light blue sweater – high cheek bones – boney frame – emaciated – wan – but real fée[9] (Cornell in Caws 1993: 243).

[8] This is the word Cornell used to denote 'teenager'.
[9] In his diaries, Cornell often uses the words 'fairy' or its French equivalent 'fée' to describe young women – those he saw on a regular basis were often given more specific labels, such as "fée aux Lapins" or "apricot fairy".

What emerges from these diary excerpts is the slightly uncomfortable picture of an old man unnaturally attracted to young girls – the amount of detail recorded implies an unrelenting surveillance, a piercing gaze which misses nothing. The appetite behind that gaze, however, seems to be of a fairly restrained, almost clinical, nature, in sharp contrast to the overtly sexual desire usually associated with the voyeur. It seems, in fact, as though Cornell is "a puritan as well as a sensualist", which Caws suggests is "the perfect double element for voyeurism" (Caws 1993: 34). Indeed, that combination translates into a powerful latent content, or subtext, operating in each box: "The containment by a box or film, or a description in the diary, is innocent, in the way it preserves the scene, but all the same it is fraught with plangent erotic content" (Caws 1993: 35).

Cornell's fascination with the clothing of the young women he watches seems to indicate a displacement or transference of erotic desire from the body to the inanimate objects that both cover and reveal it: this is a clear example of fetishism, which extends into his making of boxes. Of all the myriad interpretations that whirl around Joseph Cornell's boxes – the box as theatre; the box as container of memory; the box as site of reverie – it is perhaps that of the box as fetish object that has the most power. That there is some kind of potency inhering in these physical things, that they constitute a desire made manifest, is a conclusion difficult to avoid reaching – it is this particular sense of their objecthood that makes it possible to classify them as fetishes. And it is this aspect of the boxes, alongside and intimately bound up with notions of voyeurism, that is the other major implication of the glass to be examined here.

The term 'fetishism' came out of Enlightenment Europe: it was coined in the mid-eighteenth century by French philosopher Charles de Brosses to describe "the direct worship of particular earthly material objects as themselves endowed with quasi-personal intentionality and divine powers capable of gratifying mundane desires" (Pietz 1996: 198). This original sense of the word was used to define religious practices of 'primitive' people, and contributed to the distinction made between 'self' and 'other' that served to justify and legitimise the African slave trade. Indeed, in his *Critique of Judgment* of 1790 Kant makes that difference clear:

> The unenlightened fetishist, apprehending the material world directly from the perspective of his or her material desires, lacking the capacity for disinterested judgment, conflates subjective desire with natural teleology; the fetishist's lack of aesthetic discrimination is thus proof of an incapacity for moral autonomy and true freedom (Pietz 1996: 199).

From these beginnings, as part of a project distinguishing the civilized from the uncivilized world, the concept of fetishism went through many mutations, being debated and redefined by successive generations of philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists, as well as co-opted into the emerging discourses of political economy (by Karl Marx) and psychoanalysis (by Alfred Binet and later Sigmund Freud) in the nineteenth century. In her analysis of the term as it applies to the context of Surrealism, Ades looks at two derivations of the word proposed at the time: the first was that it came from the pidgin *fetisso,* from the Portuguese *feitiço* meaning 'charm' or 'witchcraft', which in turn came from the Latin *factitius*, denoting 'made' or 'manufactured'; the second defines *fetisso* as 'enchanted thing' and relates it to the Latin *fatum*, meaning 'fate' (Ades 1995: 70). What all of these words point to is the endowment of a man-made object with some kind of supernatural power, the coalescing of an amorphous, nebulous spiritual belief into something decidedly concrete, the embodiment of the metaphysical in a very physical container.

Of course, the adoption of the term fetish by Binet in his discussion of sexual psychology resulted in a whole new layer of significance being attached to a word already rich in meaning: in this context it described a sexual deviance or perversion, which is the sense of the word that fascinated the Surrealists and that which is most commonly understood in its contemporary usage. In fact, the Concise Oxford Dictionary provides three definitions: "a thing abnormally stimulating or attracting sexual desire; an inanimate object worshipped by primitive peoples for its supposed inherent magical powers or as being inhabited by a spirit; a thing evoking irrational devotion or respect". What is striking here is the pejorative nature of the language used – the fetish is still regarded as something outside the bounds of what is normal, civilised, rational, (even as its supposed universality is the foundational premise, I believe, on which the advertising industry in our capitalist society rests).

For Binet, the association of erotic yearning with a certain object is subjective and connected to an event in the life of the individual, who, in the overwhelming majority of cases, is male: the most likely objects to become fetishes are parts of the body – especially hands, feet, hair and eyes – and items of female clothing, particularly boots and shoes (Ades 1995: 71). The location of desire in these objects turns them into powerful things, having at once an "irreducible materiality" (Ades 1995: 72) that is strongly asserted and the capacity to invoke emotion – something belonging to an entirely different realm. The potential for seeing Cornell's box constructions in this light has already been discussed in the previous chapters: I would like to turn here to an analysis of some of the works based on a more detailed understanding of the term fetish, with all the connotations – worship, magic, lust – that it brings with it.

The most obvious examples of Cornell's work as fetish objects are those boxes devoted to female ballet dancers. A dedicated aficionado of the Romantic ballet, Cornell kept source material files on the biggest stars of the nineteenth century – Marie Taglioni, Carlotta Grisi, Fanny Elssler, Lucille Grahn and Fanny Cerrito – and became personally acquainted with some of the dancers that rose to prominence in the 1930's and 40's, such as Tamara Toumanova, Allegra Kent, Tilly Losch and Renée Jeanmaire. The boxes that he made in tribute to these dancers, in a series called *Homage to the Romantic Ballet*, are intensely personal, often containing a typewritten story of the particular dancer, or character she played, and scraps from a costume, some of which – "tokens such as hairpins, white tulle, and a piece of fabric from a ballet slipper" – he obtained from Toumanova herself (Solomon 1997: 122). These small fragments are precisely the stuff of the fetishist fantasy, tangible bits and pieces that infer the presence of the whole woman, coming from a suitably exotic environment far removed from everyday reality. Grouped together in a box and associated with a personal narrative, as in *Homage to the Romantic Ballet (Dream Fragments)* of 1941 (Fig. 16), their power is magnified. This is reinforced by the form of most of the boxes in this series: they are small lidded boxes rather than glass-fronted ones – they can be handled in a very intimate way - and carry connotations of preciousness, personally treasured items, and the possibility of secrets hidden inside. Erotically charged works, they also embody the

religious aspect of the term fetish: there is something of the atmosphere of a shrine about them, and their subjects are placed on a pedestal, in a position to be worshipped.

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that Cornell often sent these tribute boxes to the dancers in question – they were much more private than his other works, and not intended for public consumption. One collection of these kinds of works, however, was put on exhibition: mounted in a back room of the Hugo Gallery in November 1949, "La Lanterne Magique du Ballet Romantique of Joseph Cornell" was a small show of boxes and collages made for Parisian ballet dancer and revue star Renée Jeanmaire, coinciding with the gallery's main display of ballet set designs by Roland Petit, and the production of *Carmen*, starring the dancer, on at the time in New York. Excessively decorated with flowers and real caged birds, the intimate back room became itself a Cornell box, a "walk-in version" of his smaller works: whilst presented in a public space, this show was nevertheless meant as a personal dedication, with Cornell attending the opening reception, (which he usually preferred not to do), "eager to watch the actress's face as she gazed at his work for the first time" (Solomon 1997: 181). This anecdote, in fact, provides a nice insight into the complex workings of the artist's voyeurism – Cornell the relentless watcher constructs a room full of fetish objects, and takes great pleasure in watching the subject of his creations watching herself in them.

Another, perhaps more subtle, example of a box that may be operating like a fetish object is *Untitled (Butterfly Habitat)* of 1940 (Fig. 17): in its compartmentalised space, six coloured butterflies have been pinned down for display under glass. Referencing the long histories of the western collection, classification and exhibition of specimens, the (decidedly male) attempt to impose a scientific order on the unruly natural world, the box also inevitably alludes to the power relations involved in the ownership and control of those specimens. The freedom of flight that the butterflies represent has been tamed and confined to a physical object that can be held and possessed – one of the central defining characteristics of the fetish. Adding significantly to the fetish interpretation in this box is the glass: covering each of the six compartments is a piece of glass that has been spattered with white paint, save for a circle at the centre which has been left untouched, and through which parts of each butterfly can be seen clearly. The effect is

of a frosted window pane, through which just fragments of a scene may be glimpsed by the voyeur – the circles highlight only sections of the insects, turning them into abstract signs that can potentially carry the personal desires projected by each individual viewer. Butterflies are a particularly successful motif here, their connotations of flight, ethereality, whimsy and femininity – their beating wings and softly powdered bodies - make them metaphorically related to the other creatures that so entranced Cornell: ballerinas, birds and the 'fairies' of his diaries. Forever enclosed in a box, safe from the ravages of the outside world, preserved in their pristine state from the inevitability of decay, protected from the transmutation into something else that is their natural trajectory, they represent the perfect fantasy of possession.

There is one last implication of the pane of glass pertinent to this discussion – its reflective quality. An inherent physical property of the material, it nevertheless has consequences for the viewer of Cornell's boxes. Seeing one's own act of looking reflected back from the glass heightens the feeling that a private space is being transgressed: it imposes a self-awareness that is impossible to evade. That shiny reflective surface is often multiplied within the boxes, through the addition of smaller panes of glass that divide the interior or the inclusion of objects such as cordial glasses, mostly in the *Soap Bubble Sets* (Fig. 18) and *Celestial Navigation* series of works. In these examples, there is the possibility of an almost infinite number of repetitions of the images inside as they get subtly reflected on these interior surfaces. This effect is sometimes intentionally exploited by the artist's inclusion of shards of mirror in a box: in *Observatory Colomba Carrousel* of 1953 (Fig. 19), several pieces of broken mirror are attached to the back of the box, where they fleetingly hold the fractured reflection of each passing viewer. These disrupted surfaces are one more indication of the unbounded nature of the associative power of each Cornell box – they are truly "mentally immense, physically condensed constructions" (Caws 1997: 207).

Importantly, these shards are also references to a putative whole, and to the task of salvaging with which Cornell seems to be engaged – the piecing together of bits of information about the world, garnered through encounters with the physical traces left by people and ideas, and the recovery of correspondences between things that might

have been lost. The words ‘salvage’ and ‘recovery’ of course imply that those bonds were once there, were once intact: my use of them is intentional, as I have come to the conclusion that Cornell, in his process of gathering information, in collecting texts and images and objects, was seeking out their fundamental connectedness to other things. Those threads do sometimes appear fragile – perhaps only related by being held together in the artist’s hand – but they are there nevertheless, made manifest in the boxes. The chance encounter is a crucial element of Cornell’s creative process, but only as far as his activity of searching for material is concerned, (and here I mean material in the broadest possible sense, encompassing his wanderings in the city and personal interactions, observations, thoughts and feelings, as well as the physical stuff that he acquired), and not in the sense of an organizing principle at work in the construction of the boxes. In looking for affinities between things, that are presumed to be already there, in need only of revelation, Cornell was open to the fortuitous discovery, and the potential of ordinary things to be invested with mystery and meaning, through their associations with other things.