Màster en Estudis Comparatius de Literatura, Art i Pensament: treballs de fi de màster

"Philosophical Toys: play, collecting and experience in the art of Joseph Cornell"

Leonie Elisabeth Peters

Dr. Sonia Arribas Verdugo

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INSTITUT UNIVERSITARI DE CULTURA
Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Barcelona

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Hexaedros de madera y de vidrio
apenas más grandes que una caja de zapatos.
En ellos caben la noche y sus lámparas.

Monumentos a cada momento
hechos con los desechos de cada momento:
jaulas de infinito.

Canicas, botones, dedales, dados,
alfileres, timbres, cuentas de vidrio:
cuentos del tiempo.

Memoria teje y destejo los ecos:
en las cuatro esquinas de la caja
juegan al alelevi damas sin sombra.

El fuego enterrado en el espejo,
el agua dormida en el ágata:
solos de Jenny Lind y Jenny Colon.

"Hay que hacer un cuadro", dijo Degas,
"como se comete un crimen". Pero tú construiste
cajas donde las cosas se aligeran de sus nombres.

Slot machine de visiones,
vaso de encuentro de las reminiscencias,
hotel de grillos y de constelaciones.

Fragmentos mínimos, incoherentes:
al revés de la Historia, creadora de ruinas,
tú hiciste con tus ruinas creaciones.

Teatro de los espíritus:
los objetos juegan al aro
con las leyes de la identidad.

Grand Hotel Couronne: en una redoma
el tres de tréboles y, toda ojos,
Almendrita en los jardines de un reflejo.

Un peine es un harpa
pulsada por la mirada de una niña
muda de nacimiento.

El reflector del ojo mental
disipa el espectáculo:
dios solitario sobre un mundo extinto.

Las apariciones son patentes.
Sus cuerpos pesan menos que la luz.
Duran lo que dura esta frase.

Joseph Cornell: en el interior de tus cajas
mis palabras se volvieron visibles un instante.

– Octavio paz , Objetos y Apariciones.

Hexahedrons of wood and glass,
scarcely bigger than a shoebox,
with room in them for night and all its lights.

Monuments to every moment,
refuse of every moment, used:
cages for infinity.

Marbles, buttons, thimbles, dice,
pins, stamps, and glass beads:
tales of the time.

Memory weaves, unweaves the echoes:
in the four corners of the box
shadowless ladies play at hide-and-seek.

Fire buried in the mirror,
water sleeping in the agate:
solos of Jenny Colonne and Jenny Lind.

"One has to commit a painting," said Degas,
"the way one commits a crime." But you
constructed
boxes where things hurry away from their names.

Slot machine of visions,
condensation flask for conversations,
hotel of crickets and constellations.

Minimal, incoherent fragments
the opposite of History, creator of ruins,
out of your ruins you have made creations.

Theater of the spirits:
objects putting the laws
of identity through hoops.

"Grand Hotel de la Couronne": in a vial,
the three of clubs and, very surprised,
Thumbelina in gardens of reflection.

A comb is a harp strummed by the glance
of a little girl
born dumb.

The reflector of the inner eye
scatters the spectacle:
God all alone above an extinct world.

The apparitions are manifest,
their bodies weigh less than light,
lasting as long as this phrase lasts.

Joseph Cornell: inside your boxes
my words became visible for a moment.

(Translated by Elizabeth Bishop)

Introduction

'Marbles, buttons, thimbles, dice, pins, stamps, and glass beads', writes Octavio Paz, these are objects regularly found in the boxes made by U.S. artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972). His boxed assemblages of found objects remain an odd bird in the art world. He was born in Nyack, New York. But when his father, Joseph Cornell Sr., died the Cornell family moved to Utopia Parkway in Queens, New York City. Joseph Jr. was only thirteen at the time. He, his mother and his disabled brother Robert remained in this house for the rest of their lives. It was there in the house's garage, where Cornell had his workspace, an archive of found objects and clippings from magazines and books, held in cardboard boxes. Cornell could not draw, neither paint, nor sculpt, but with an urge to create he found his medium in the form of the shadowbox. Shadowboxes are a form of amateur art in which different objects and decorative imagery are brought together in an expository box, often as a memorial to some event. In short, Cornell was a collector and composer of found objects, who received full acknowledgment as an artist.

Cornell's designation in the art historical canon is mainly in that of the movement of Surrealism. An interpretation that was made by well-known critics such as Clement Greenberg and is still to be found in art historical overviews like *Art Since 1900.* In 1942 Greenberg briefly commented the work of Cornell in an exhibition review and gives a quite problematic interpretation stating that Cornell's works 'mean or represent nothing not itself'[1]. He writes this putting Cornell in the context of Surrealism, which, according to Greenberg continues from Dada, which in turn would stem from Art for Art's sake. So in Greenberg's vision the boxes of Cornell do not refer to anything but themselves and thus should be seen as abstract works.

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[1] Greenberg. 'Review'. 131, 132.

Hal Foster and his coauthors in *Art Since 1900* (first published in 2004) write much later than Greenberg and left behind this vision of Surrealism as a movement understood in the line of art for art's sake (a clear misinterpretation by Greenberg, since Surrealism was exactly one of the most revolutionary avant-gardes, challenging the status quo in and outside of the art world). Nevertheless they continue to place Cornell among the Surrealists[2]. This is understandable because in his early career he was embraced by the Surrealist leader himself, André Breton, and was included in the first Surrealist exhibition in New York City organized by Julien Levy. Renowned art historian Rosalind Krauss in another work of overview also places Cornell among the Surrealists, although acknowledges that he had somehow different interests. According to Krauss, where the Surrealists were obsessed with dreams, Cornell was occupied with history, or rather 'the access to the past achieved by memory'[3]. I comment these overviews such as *Art Since 1900* and *Passages in Modern Sculpture* because they illustrate the more general interpretation of an artist.

The monographs on Cornell, of course, have a slightly different approach. Instead of trying to place the artist among others they demonstrate how the artist can be understood more singularly. One of the earliest monographs is *A Joseph Cornell Album* (1974) by Dore Ashton. She made a break in the interpretation of Cornell, releasing him from his general allocation in the movement of Surrealism. In her extended introductory essay, Ashton exposes Cornell's deep interest in Romanticism and Symbolism. Instead of seeing Cornell as a Surrealist, Ashton presents him rather as a late Romantic Symbolist. Apart from this adjustment in Cornell's allocation in art movements, Ashton also explains that Cornell did not work as a regular visual artist, but rather as a poet. Cornell was a fervent reader and it was literature that formed one of the primary sources for inspiration, much more than the visual

[2] Foster. *Art Since 1900.* 254.
[3] Krauss. *Passages in Modern Sculpture.* 131.

arts. So not only his allocation in movements (Surrealism, Romanticism, Symbolism), but also his employment of different art forms (visual art and literature), is confusing in Cornell.

Moreover, this influence from literature to visual art is not unidirectional. As can be read in the poem by Paz, the Mexican poet saw Cornell as a kind of visual poet. Other proof of Cornell's continuing trace in literature is the book *A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry Inspired by Joseph Cornell.* This book was an initiative of U.S. author Jonathan Safran-Foer. He solicited and collected from different authors several poems and pieces of fiction all inspired by the work of Cornell.

After Ashton not much was written about Cornell, until interest reemerged after the 1980s and continued until today. One of the newly interested was art historian Jodi Hauptman who proposes another point of view in her book *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema* (1999). Instead of looking for sources of inspiration in the past, as Ashton did, Hauptman looks to the opposite direction in time and sees in the new and modern medium of film a defining source of Cornell's work. But simultaneously, she doesn't contradict Ashton's perspective. She adds to it. Although Cornell was a man of the past, he was also of his time and Hauptman presents him as this more contemporary artist.

Other art historians who have dedicated much time to the investigation of Cornell's work as well and who are referred to repeatedly in this thesis are Diane Waldman (who wrote the book *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams* (2002)) and Dawn Ades (who wrote an extensive essay in the exhibition catalogue of Cornell's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1980). Both have a more neutral and descriptive stance. Another Cornell specialist is Kirsten Hoving who studied the artist's interest in astronomy and turned it into the book *Joseph Cornell and astronomy: A Case for the Stars* (2009).

The mentioned scholars all provide slightly different approaches to Cornell's work. But one does not necessarily exclude the other. It is exactly because Cornell does not seem to

belong to one movement particularly, and his occupation is somewhere between visual artist, poet and even cinematographer that makes him an interesting subject. Cornell was an ‘authentic’ artist in the sense that he created for himself rather than followed tendencies.

His boxes invite different approaches, because in them one finds all kinds of objects and imagery, full of allusions, and every viewer might associate them differently. His boxes are accumulations. They are layered with signification. There are series of boxes that treat the same theme and there are motifs that can be recognized across the complete oeuvre. He was not always satisfied and often reworked old boxes. This repetitive way of working and the returning themes and motifs seem to suggest a work that was never finished and ultimately infinite. Therefore, I propose to see his complete work as one project, consisting of shambles that are always interrelated and at the same time complete on its own. The eclectic quality of Cornell’s work makes it all the more interesting and invites to keep adding new ways of seeing to the existent interpretations.

Another possibility to approach Cornell’s work is to not dive into the possible sources of his work, but rather explore its effects. What happens when one is confronted with a Cornell box? They are often described as enigmatic, or as ‘philosophical toys’ (the latter also employed by the artist himself in a diary entry in 1960). To look at a Cornell might then be to try to unlock an enigma, to play with it as a toy. Cornell’s work is open to an interdisciplinary approach. As said before, the role of literature and cinema has already been treated. Thinking of the artworks as philosophical toys made me curious about a possible philosophical commentary. This is a less obvious approach since direct references to philosophy are scarcely to be found. There is a box titled *Discarded Descartes,* which is filled with rubber balls. The title sounds like a pun and seems rather a rejection of the French philosopher’s ideas. Instead of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum,* Cornell might have proposed *ludo ergo sum*

(I play, therefore I am). Although, thought experiments, such as elaborated by philosophers including Descartes, could also be seen as a form of play, a game of the mind.

Returning to Hauptman, one of the thinkers who served her in her exploration of Cornell was Walter Benjamin. She has convincingly exposed several resemblances and pointed out various parallel interests. Both men did not know of each other's existence. But they were both men of their time and that time was in great part overlapped (Benjamin lived between 1892 and 1940). Hauptman explains how Cornell's journaling project GC44 echoes Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in which they employ a similar form of historiography that is formed by an accumulation of ephemera and citations. She also comments their similar interests in childhood and urban experience. I recognized a similar resemblance in interests of these two men. Through this thesis I have fallen back on Hauptman, but, convinced that there is more to be heralded from this comparison, I have also gone beyond her application of Benjamin's thought. Apart from Benjamin's concepts of historiography, childhood and urban experience (as treated by Hauptman) I also explore his concepts of play, collecting and experience. Hauptman's comparison is always in function of her goal to show the central importance of cinema in Cornell's work. Her use of Benjamin is brief and sporadic. My goal is to show the philosophy to be evoked through Cornell's work; how to understand his boxes as literal philosophical toys. What does play mean and what is its importance in Cornell's boxes?

What I find missing in the existing application of Benjamin's thought to the art of Cornell is the relation Benjamin recognized between children's play and experience. Benjamin's thought is characteristic for its sporadic and sometimes unfinished nature. His ideas on experience and play are not clearly worked out in one text, but rather scattered over his complete writings. For understanding this relation between play and experience the chapter by Carlo Salzani 'Experience and Play: Walter Benjamin and the Prelapsarian Child'

has been very useful. Salzani showed where the ideas on experience and play can be found and set out how Benjamin’s writings on both these subjects are deeply interwoven. Although the main subject of this thesis is the work of Cornell, it is through Benjamin’s written ideas that Cornell’s work could be looked at with more profundity than merely as toys or mere amusement.

The central question of this thesis is: what is the philosophy behind Cornell’s philosophical toys? The toy element is widely recognized in studies of Cornell’s art, but there is still a lack in responding the actual point of using it. Therefore important subquestions are ‘what is play?’ and ‘why is play important?’ These questions also imply to open up the philosophical dimension of the work as above has been suggested. The response to the central question is threefold and thus divided in three chapters.

In the first chapter, I comment the idea of Cornell’s objects as toys. Firstly I offer a description of the artworks as toys. To do so, I start with a visual analysis of *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest).* The aim here is to expose how this work (and with it many others) can be seen as a toy. By highlighting what elements of existing toys, and other objects of amusement, can be recognized, the idea of Cornell’s artworks as toys is clarified. Following, I add a more theoretical commentary of what ‘to play’ actually means. Finally, I formulate a first response to the question of why Cornell might have used the toy form.

In the second chapter I extend the element of play into the habit of collecting. Cornell was a fervent collector of objects. One of Cornell’s works that clearly refers to collecting is *Solomon Islands.* Through an analysis of this work, and the extension of it to other works, I hope to clarify Cornell’s occupation as a collector. Secondly, I add a more theoretical meditation on the relation of the collector to that of the habits of children. Thus, forming a bridge from the previous chapter occupied with toys and play to their connection with collecting. This is a connection that is recognizable in Benjamin’s thought as well. All this

will add to describe Cornell's working method and what it might implicate. Part of this working method was collecting and archiving to, finally, assemble. I argue this was done not so much as a static archivist, but rather as a child at play.

In the third and last chapter I explain what the results and the effects of Cornell's play in the forms of both toys and collecting have to offer. Departing from another of his works, *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*, I illuminate the ideas and visions evoked by his work. This work in particular hints to what Cornell might have attracted in the ephemera he assembled. Here Cornell offers a meditation on play and natural science, which implicates a certain way of experiencing the world. Again, I complement the visual and art historical analysis of the artwork with a theoretical comment. Here, I relate play to the concept of 'experience' and its problematic in Modernism.

The question thus is less 'where does the artwork come from?' (Its sources of influence, art historical context, psychology of the artist), and more 'what does the artwork evoke?' (i.e. what do these philosophical toys offer the viewer?). The working method is a combination of visual analysis, the commentary of existing art historical interpretation and philosophical support. Never leaving out a great attention to detail, which is crucial in the Cornellian universe. Through focusing on this obsession with small details, key to the creation of his microcosmoses, and elaborating on the interests these objects show, I expect to be able to put words to Cornell's enigmatic visual language. Through Cornell's creations, one can discover a way of looking at the world that might already have been developed in thought but with Cornell finds a striking visual companion.

It must be said that even though through the three artworks discussed in this thesis a great deal of Cornell's interests will be treated, others remain untouched. His fascination with the Romantic ballet, poetry, ornithology, cinema will remain underexposed here. Partly

because some of these themes have already been widely discussed by others, but also for the practical reason of limited space and time for this thesis.

1. Playtime: *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)* and the philosophy of toys

In this chapter I comment on the description of the artworks of Cornell as toys. First I describe how the works are formally derived from playthings. In the second part I offer a meditation on what the act of playing means with the help of writings by Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and Sigmund Freud. Thirdly this meditation leads to my interpretation of what Cornell's work might implicate through the appropriation of the forms of play. Thus the questions of this chapter are: how are the artworks toys? What does play even mean? Why do adult men (like Cornell) still play and create playthings?

1.1 Cornell's appropriation of toys

As said above, in this first section I expose Cornell's formal use of toys. In the first part, I introduce this description as toys by a visual analysis and a short interpretation of an exemplary toy-derived work, *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest).* In the second section I continue with an explanation how the form of this work is recognizable in optical toys that were popular around the turn of the twentieth century. Thirdly and lastly, I point out some other allusions to toys, games and amusement (to be found throughout Cornell's oeuvre). This all to illustrate how the forms of toys can be recognized in Cornell's work.

1.1.1. *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)*: entering a miniature world

Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest) (Fig. 1) consists of a dark brown, round wood box, with a diameter of 19,3 cm and a height of 9,5 cm. With the top off, as normally exposed, one sees the inner side is covered with mirrors and the bottom with sawdust of an almost golden color. The bottom has five small holes with each a different colored glass marble. In these holes are also five pins, each supporting a thimble. In the side of the box there is one small hole

through which one can look, a peephole. In general this box doesn't make much sense at first sight. Someone pulled about his or her grandmother's sewing kit?

The *Untitled* part of the title was frequently used by Cornell and is a leftover from his time with the Surrealists. But where the Surrealists often left their works actually untitled, it seems Cornell couldn't leave his work open to that much ambiguity. Therefore, he often added a description in parentheses, which in many cases hints to a way of looking at the object presented. In this case this descriptive part of the title consists of two seemingly unrelated subtitles, *Beehive* and *Thimble Forest.*

Considering the *Beehive* part, I recognize the resemblance of the thimbles to beehives. But five beehives don't make a forest. Matthew Affron explains that it is when the viewer peeks through the tiny hole in the side of the box, that the work comes alive[4]. The inner side of the box is covered with mirrors creating the effect of *mise en abyme*, when looking through the peephole one sees the five thimbles multiplied until infinity, forming a *Thimble Forest.* The thimble, this very common household object, gets transformed through a play with mirrors. At the same time, the viewer shrinks in size to fit into this miniature world, calling into mind Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There.* These are both tales about Alice, a girl who enters a miniaturized world and lives some fantastical experiences. Another tale, which Mexican poet Octavio Paz probably recognized in it[5], is Hans Christian Andersen's *Thumbelina.* This fairytale is also about a miniaturized girl, reduced to the size of a thumb. *Thumbelina* is even a more convincing figure, since it would also refer back again to the thimbles, used to protect the thumbs. Waldman, although in the context of other works by

[4] Affron. 'Joseph Cornell's Optical Toys'. 109.

[5] As he writes in his poem dedicated to Cornell cited in the opening of this thesis: 'Almendrita en los jardines de un reflejo.'. *Almendrita* being a free Spanish translation for Thumbelina.

Cornell, confirms that Cornell read both Carroll and Andersen[6]. Entering Cornell's *Thimble Forest* invites to enter such imaginary worlds as Carroll and Andersen penned down.

Another way of looking through this box I imagined when returning to the *Beehive* part of the title. Perhaps instead of *Alice* or *Thumbelina* in a forest, the viewer becomes as small as a bee buzzing and swarming in its beehive. Apart from the thimbles resemblance to beehives already mentioned above, their composition has this similar repetitive, geometric pattern of the honeycomb, which is enforced by the mirrors' reflections, and, of course, the gold colored floor of the box referring to the honeycomb's color. The bee reappears in another of Cornell's works, *Les abeilles,* about which Waldman comments it should be understood as highly symbolic. She explains that in ancient tradition, the bee is a metaphor for the soul and a symbol of eloquence, poetry and the mind[7]. This symbolism might as well be applicable to this *Beehive.*

What remains unexplained are the colored glass marbles. When children play with these they aim to get the marble in a hole, where in the box all marbles already are. But this is rather unsatisfying. There are more versions of this work. One of them, *Object (Beehive)* from 1934, could help to understand more of its descendant from 1948. Ades shows that the early version has on the bottom of its box a map that pictures Hell at the middle of its cosmos and the outer circle as the realm of the happy[8]. Between these two circle the sun, the earth, Venus and two moons. With this in mind, I suggest the marbles might refer to celestial bodies. Not a strange supposition since Cornell was very occupied with astronomy, an interest that is a little further discussed in the third chapter of this thesis.

It thus seems, once the viewer discovers the trick, Cornell's *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)* opens up to another dimension, an imaginary world. With these wanderings

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[6] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 62; 129.
[7] Ibid. 37. Waldman cites 'bee' in Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, transl. John Buchanan-Brown, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 79.
[8] Ades. 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell'. 32.

of the imagination I've tried to show how deep one can dive in the rather small assemblage Cornell offers. Perhaps the viewer becomes all of these things (insect, fairy tale character), but what counts mostly is that the viewer has this capacity of activating such a perspective, to even think up this imaginative landscape, because the artist himself does not directly offer this. Cornell merely gives some guidelines. If this is a toy, the player has to set out and play the game.

1.1.2. *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)*: optical toy

Considering its functioning, *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)* reminded me of a peephole diorama, which children nowadays make of (for example) a shoebox, painted and filled with images and objects to create a miniature scene when looking through the peephole. This children's pastime has a predecessor, the peep show. Today 'peep show' commonly refers to its pornographic variant, a sex show or film, watched through a viewing slot. They do have the same formal principle as the child's playbox but belong to the adult's universe. Nevertheless it is a theme worth considering. Sexuality is very ambiguous in the work and person of Cornell. Hauptman explains Cornell was a celibate[9]. But at the same time he had a great interest in beautiful women. Cornell made some works that could be called voyeuristic, mainly the ones he made to praise movie stars or ballerinas. Among them one finds actresses like Lauren Bacall and Marilyn Monroe, who were highly sexualized by the movie industry. Nevertheless Cornell never pursued to present them as sex symbols, but rather pointed out their innocence and girl like aspects. Hauptman, who approaches Cornell's work primarily from the perspective of cinema and discussed his fascination with the movie stars, proposed that this conception of these women as innocent can also be seen as a form of denial from the

[9] Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* 79.

part of Cornell of what his real desires were[10]. She stresses that these desires might have been troubling since his love for the not fully matured female body. The question if to condemn this interest in the young as pedophilia is difficult. There is no proof that Cornell acted upon such desires or even felt them, and Hauptman only suggests it since the question to her arises from his work. This ambiguity of having deep interest in children also lays over other figures such as Lewis Carroll. But the interest in the child by Cornell was, I think, mostly related to Romanticism and its appreciation for the child's (supposed) innocence and purity. Hauptman also refers to a journal entry in which Cornell mentions Andersen and Franz Schubert as 'types of universal genius who remained celibates – some of whom exemplified and practiced a healthier sense of love life than is thought possible these days'[11]. I propose that his distance from sex can also be seen as a certain form of resistance to the direction modernity was heading, including the sexualization of culture already visible in early cinema. Therefore he might have preferred earlier times in which innocence was more admirable than provocation. It is worthy that instead of presenting Monroe as a voluptuous and passionate female (as Willem de Kooning, among most other artists, portrayed her); Cornell did not even incorporate her image in his dedication to her, *Custodian (Silent Dedication to MM),* (Fig. 2). Discussing this last mentioned work extensively, Hauptman also returns to the complexity of the role of women in Cornell's work. What attracted him in Monroe was not her sensuality, but rather her tragic childhood, leaving her a red marble and a cosmic custodian[12]. As one of the first, he presented her as this sad child, and pinned through her façade.

After this short digression, returning to *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)* and its form it is interesting to get into the history of the peep show and its other uses. The Encyclopedia Britannica gives the following definition: 'Peep show, children's toy and

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid. 80.
[12] Ibid. 209.

scientific curiosity, usually consisting of a box with an eyehole through which the viewer sees a miniature scene or stage setting, painted or constructed in perspective.' Furthermore it tells that peep shows were already being made during the early Renaissance, the earliest known being of 1437, made by Leonardo Battista Alberti[13]. Thereafter peep shows mostly have been popular among children who encountered them in the streets, exposed by itinerant showmen. They are the precursor of various optical toys, which themselves became precursors of cinema.

Affron discusses in the chapter 'Joseph Cornell's Optical Toys' various descendents of the peep show. He recognizes in the *Beehives* a 'Cornellian variation on the zoetrope', for its drum-shape and animate nature (when moved just a little, the thimbles wobble)[14]. The zoetrope is a pre-cinematic object. It is cylinder formed with thin lengthy holes in the side, and placed on a holder. On the interior side of the cylinder one attaches a sequence of images. When spinning the zoetrope, the sequence becomes one moving image through an optical illusion imposed by movement. The resemblance is clear, but I suggest it might be (also) a praxinoscope that Cornell had in mind. The praxinoscope is similar to the zoetrope, but has another cylinder in the middle covered with mirrors, which reflect the sequence of images attached to the outer cylinder. It is this game of mirrors in combination with motion that is recognizable in *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest).*

Affron's discussion shows Cornell's interests for optical toys and early photography, which in his time were still quite present and which probably, formed great part of his childhood's visual world. Cornell collected these types of devices and was surely not hesitant to incorporate their form and effect in his work. Other art historians, such as Ades, similarly point out this formal influence[15]. It was also a shared interest with his influential friend,

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[13] 'Peep Show'. *Encyclopedia Britannica.*
[14] Affron. 'Joseph Cornell's Optical Toys'. 109.
[15] Ades. 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell'. 30.

Marcel Duchamp. Although where Cornell was more taken by Victorian optical games, Duchamp's focus was on optical kinetic machines, precision optics and rotary apparatus[16].

Cornell was certainly not the first to use the peep show effect in his art. Various art historians have pointed out the fact that Johannes Vermeer was, although not directly obvious, one of the greatest and consistent inspirations for Cornell's work. Ashton refers to the perspectives Vermeer used in his paintings of seventeenth century Dutch interiors[17]. Although it is impossible to compare these two artists who are from a very different time and place, the perspectives used by Vermeer are from a similar point of view as those of Cornell; as if peeking into the room without being noticed by the person viewed. This play of perspective of looking inside is merely one thing, the use of windows and mirrors, daily objects, references to optics, cosmology and science are recognizable in both Vermeer's and Cornell's works. And, returning to optical devices, Vermeer probably used the father of all cameras, the *camera obscura*[18].

1.1.3 Cornell as toymaker: from sand, clowns, jacks and marbles to slot machines and Coney Island

The form of *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)* as an optical toy is now obvious, but elements of play can be found everywhere in Cornell's oeuvre. It was as early as for the first exhibition of Cornell's work, which was held at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1932, that the gallery owner himself described Cornell's work as 'toys for adults'[19]. Levy thought Cornell had been inspired by French puzzle boxes. But Ades proposes the toy element might have originated much closer to home, in Cornell finding ways to entertain his disabled brother[20].

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[16] Ibid. 28.
[17] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 87.
[18] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 74.
[19] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 5.
[20] Ades. 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell'. 18.

Cornell had difficulties with others interpreting his work. At first he protested to be referred to as toymaker, the last thing he wanted was for his work to be seen as mere amusement[21]. Much later in 1960 he probably understood the value of this toy element in his work and even described his work himself as 'forgotten game, a philosophical toy from the Victorian era'[22].

Ashton asserts that Cornell's work is not just to be looked at but is also meant to be handled[23]. The need for movement and handling a work has already been mentioned above in the case of *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest),* but a series that demands at least the same intervention of the viewer are the sandboxes. These need to be picked up and moved so that there is motion of the grains of sand. Play with sand calls to mind sandboxes and the play children invent in it. Kynaston McShine writes that this play with sand is not just a simple toy, neither merely a Surrealist chance creation, but rather a reference to hourglasses and the tides[24]. They are allusions of time, which is an important motif in Cornell and for which childhood and the element of play form useful modes of exploring. Cornell's boxes thus are not mere play, but are also filled with symbolism.

Apart from this handling of the boxes as one would handle a toy, there are many more references to child's play. In the series of soap bubble boxes (of which one is discussed in the third chapter) Cornell incorporated clay pipes, referring to the play of blowing soap bubbles. There are clownesque figures as in *Untitled (Harlequin)* (Fig. 3) that are recognizable in Victorian games Cornell probably knew from his own childhood, like the 'rubber ball shooting gallery'[25]. *Untitled (Jacks)* (Fig. 4) looks like a toy with its marbles, jacks and stars. Marbles, jacks, gummy balls and toy blocks reappear in many boxes, for example in *Untitled (Toy Blocks)* (Fig. 5) and *Medici Slot Machine (Object)* (Fig. 6).

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[21] Ibid. 19
[22] Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* 165.
[23] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 98.
[24] McShine. *Joseph Cornell.* 12.
[25] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 33.

‘Slot machine’ refers to the game machines (now mostly used for gambling) found in playing arcades. These kinds of machines are another form of play objects that is a returning form in Cornell’s work. Looking at the *Medici Slot Machine (Object)* I recognize the three slots, the middle one already set to the image of the boy and the two slots on the sides still spinning different images in suspense to the possibility of a jackpot. But at the same time, these supposed spinning slots consist of blocks, much as toy blocks or dices.

Furthermore, Cornell’s trips to Coney Island since his childhood must have inspired him for works such as *Swiss Shoot-the-Chutes* (Fig.7), a reference to the attraction park’s ride *Shooting the Chutes*. This ride is in a boat, which is slid off a ramp onto the water. The diagonal movement returns in Cornell’s box in which a ball that one enters in the above right side of the box comes zigzagging down to exit at the lower right side. This form returns in works such as *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)* (Fig. 8) and *Untitled (Forgotten Game)* (Fig. 9). The inserting of the ball to make something happen also has the same functioning as the coin that is inserted in the penny arcade machines. Contemplating the title *Forgotten Game,* Ades wondered what Cornell meant by it. Have we forgotten how it works or has it been forgotten and abandoned?[26]. Cornell is a creator of fictional history. This game never existed before he made it. But Ades’s line of thought can be extended. Although this game never existed before Cornell made it up and thus cannot have been forgotten, one could wonder about the games we did forget. Or how children become adults and with it forget their childhood games. This made me wonder, what actually is play? And why do (or did) we do it?

[26] Ades. ‘The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell’. 29.

1.2 Thinking toys and play

The aim of this section is to introduce some theoretical (in this case literary, philosophicaland psychoanalytical) sources on the concept of play. After introducing these, I will employ them in the third section of this chapter to interpret the work of Cornell. Firstly, I summarize the ideas of Baudelaire as found in his 1853 essay 'A Philosophy of Toys' since some other scholars have already mentioned this essay in relation to Cornell. In the second part, I introduce Benjamin's quite similar observations, found in several short writings. Following, I add Freud's comment on a boy's play in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, since Benjamin based some of his assumptions on this text. In the fourth and last part of this section, I briefly reflect upon the changing role of the child in the time these authors were writing. This is accompanied with a return to the work of Cornell and how he might have commented this perspective on the child.

1.2.1 Baudelaire´s *Philosophy of Toys*

Both Ades and Affron both refer very shortly to Charles Baudelaire's essay 'A Philosophy of Toys'. Affron points out his description of the scientific toy[27]. Baudelaire writes that they 'amuse for a long time and develop in the childish brain a taste for marvellous and unexpected effects.'[28] Affron concludes that these effects are also recognisable in the philosophical toys of Cornell. Ades refers to the part in which Baudelaire writes that play is the first initiation of the child into art, as art begins in the imagination incited by play[29]. She proposes that this deeper implication of play and what it results to is what should be understood in Cornell's 'toys' as well.

[27] Affron. 'Joseph Cornell's Optical Toys'. 118.
[28] Baudelaire. 'A Philosophy of Toys'. 202.
[29] Ades. 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell'. 31.

I would like to go a little further into what Baudelaire has written about toys. He explains that as an adult man he still has a weakness for toys. About toyshops he writes 'There is an extraordinary gaiety in a great toyshop which makes it preferable to a fine bourgeois apartment. Is not the whole of life to be found there in miniature – and far more highly coloured, sparkling and polished than real life?'[30]. Baudelaire thus seems to recognize a refuge from adult life in the immersion in the child's universe. Furthermore, Baudelaire understands that the child's imagination is what realizes his or her play, not so much the toy itself and the reality it refers to. Baudelaire points out that it is not so much the toy that incites play. Much play is merely invented with objects at hand in combination with the child's imagination. This is how some chairs might get transformed in a running train[31]. He comments on 'barbaric and primitive toys' and how they can, at times, be more satisfying than expensive toys. What matters is what the child makes of it. A last and curious remark he makes is the urge of some children to destroy their toys. Baudelaire describes this as the search for the soul of their toys, a first metaphysical tendency[32]. But finding nothing, this is when melancholy and gloom begin. The withdrawal of the child from its magical world sets in.

1.2.2. Benjamin: Berlin, toys and play.

In an introduction to a chapter, Hauptman shortly mentions the similarity in interest in childhood of both Cornell and Walter Benjamin. She mentions what Gershom Scholem and Susan Buck-Morss write. Hauptman writes that Scholem explained that Benjamin's interest in children was mainly in their creative imagination and their as yet undistorted world[33]. From Buck-Morss, Hauptman learns that Benjamin recognized a relation between creative

[30] Baudelaire. 'A Philosophy of Toys'. 199.
[31] Ibid. 200.
[32] Ibid. 204.
[33] Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* 163.

and revolutionary impulses[34]. What Hauptman takes from Benjamin is the focus on how these aspects of childhood can be used for adult ends. She does not fully exhaust the comparison, which is understandable since this is neither her aim. It does make me wonder what else Benjamin wrote. So instead of relying on Benjamin's commentators I consult him directly and research more painstakingly, focussing in this subsection on his thoughts on play.

Benjamin's remarks on children, toys and play are similar to those of Baudelaire. A first is that one on the child's imagination. Both Baudelaire and Benjamin recognize that children find the marvellous in the most (for adults) unexpected objects and events. In *A Berlin Childhood around 1900* Benjamin writes about his childhood experiences in the .German capital. He describes all kinds of magical twists to everyday and real life events. Market women become 'enthroned priestesses of a venal Ceres'[35]; ghosts that appear in Walter's dreams were in reality burglars[36]. This marvelling of the child's brain is what Baudelaire also pointed at. It could be stimulated by toys, but also arises with whatever a child notices.

Like Baudelaire, Benjamin also pointed out that child's play is not always the result of what the toy was intended for. After visiting a toy exhibition, Benjamin reminds the reader in 'Old Toys' that toys are not determined by adults, but are simply the result of children at play[37]. In 'The Cultural History of Toys', a review of a book about the history of toys, he extends this thought and hopes we will overcome this misunderstanding. The toy does not determine the child's play, it's rather the other way around: 'A child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wants to play with sand, and so he turns into a baker; he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or a policeman.'[38]. Furthermore, he also refers to

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[34] Ibid. 164
[35] Benjamin. *Childhood in Berlin.* 70.
[36] Ibid. 102.
[37] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 2, 1*. 101.
[38] Ibid. 115.

primitive toys, like hoops and balls, and calls them authentic playthings, since these rarely mean a thing to adults. And again, similar to what Baudelaire had said, Benjamin concludes 'the more they are based on imitation, the further away they lead us from real, living play'[39]. This real, living play is not a child imitating an adult. In 'Toys and Play' (another review of the same book as 'The Cultural History of Toys'), Benjamin extends this thought. We don't play to imitate and be modelled into adults. He refers to three play gestures: 'First, cat and mouse (any game of catch); second, the mother animal that defends her nest and her young (for example, a goalkeeper or tennis player); third, the struggle between two animals for prey, a bone, or an object of love (a football, polo ball, and so on)'[40]. Considering these gestures, Benjamin writes that it is probably through the rhythms of this kind of play, in which we relate to other players and playthings, that the child gains possession of him- or herself.

Subsequently, Benjamin points out that all play, these rhythms of self-comprehension, is obedient to the law of repetition[41]. 'Do it again' is the motto of the child and is at the heart of all play. This pleasure of repetition is an idea Benjamin takes from Sigmund Freud, who treated it in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* But this repetition might not be for the pleasure of victory again and again, Freud explained.

1.2.3. Freud: discarding your mother as play

In the second part of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Freud dedicated a few paragraphs to an one-and-a-half-year-old boy and the game he invented and what it might mean. This child, described as a rather regular and 'good boy', played repeatedly a game that consisted of flinging small objects away from him so they would disappear into some corner or under the

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid. 119.
[41] Ibid. 120.

furniture[42]. Even toys did not serve their expected purpose, but were thrown by the boy somewhere hard to find. The second part of this game consisted of the great quest of retrieving these objects. When done so the boy responded cheerfully.

Freud interpreted this particular game of 'hide and seek' as a response to his mother leaving the house, only to come home again later[43]. Since this was an unpleasant experience for the boy and one he could not control, through his repetition and play he could get an active role in it. It might have been not so much the joy of finding the object (the coming home of his mother), but rather the taking control over the situation[44]. The boy changes the situation from the mother leaving the child to the child sending away his mother. Freud concludes that this reaction to powerful impressions is also recognizable in play adapted from, for example, a doctor's visit. It is thus not the imitation of the adult's handling, but rather a taking on an active role and gaining possession of the self that is established through child's play. The goal is to turn something unpleasant into something pleasurable[45].

1.2.4. The emancipation of the child

It is important to keep in mind that these men were writing in a time that the conception of children was changing drastically. Freud and Benjamin wrote during the 1920s and the visionary Baudelaire already in 1853. Benjamin comments the changing conception of what a child is. Children were not merely people of reduced scale, and the emancipation of children's clothing from that from adults that didn't arrive until the nineteenth century. Cornell was a bit younger but was at least as interested in these questions of childhood and play.

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[42] Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* 8.
[43] Ibid. 9.
[44] Ibid. 10.
[45] Ibid. 11.

In the *Medici Slot Machine (Object)* (Fig. 6) Cornell seems to comment this change in conception. He uses a reproduction of Sofonisba Anguissola's *Portrait of Marquis Massimiliano Stampa* to refer to childhood, or rather the absence of one. It is curious that Cornell portrays various Renaissance children in his Medici series (in other works belonging to this series he uses reproductions from Agnolo Bronzino's portrait of *Bia di Cosimo de' Medici* and Bernardino Pinturicchio's *Portrait of a Boy)*[46]. These portraits are solemn, as probably were their childhoods. Waldman mentions Massimiliano lost his father at the age of nine (Cornell lost his at thirteen) and inherited his title, impeding him to live a happy childhood as is the ideal today[47]. To contrast the solemnity of the portrait Cornell tries to create movement, hence the reference to a tolling slot machine. Cornell surrounds Massimiliano with toy objects like marbles and jacks. Waldman suggests Cornell juxtaposes the renaissance child that is portrayed as an adult (in reduced size) with that of a modern child. He hints at the difference between the old and new ideas of the child[48]. The old idea is that of a child as a tiny adult that still needs to be moulded by his or her educators. The renewed idea is that of a child as a being that has a way of experiencing and knowing the world of its own, who through play 'moulds' him- or herself. This box is thus not a mere reference to the game machine, but rather uses the form of a slot machine to create a meditation on childhood and the experience that is lived in it.

1.3. Cornell's philosophical toys for adults

This section brings together the previous two to offer a deeper understanding of the role of play in Cornell's work. The central question is why an adult man like Cornell made playthings. To propose a possible answer, firstly I explain the redemptive aspect of play as

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[46] To not cause too much art historical confusion, only Bia was an actual member of the Medici family. So, Cornell actually named them wrongly.
[47] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 70.
[48] Ibid.

escaping from reality. In the second part, I comment on the interest in the imaginative power of children as recognized by Romanticism and Surrealism. This interest is similar for Cornell who leaned heavily on these two movements. Lastly, a Freudian note is added as to what Cornell actually might have been doing in his play of creation.

1.3.1. Why adults play: play as escapism

In 1.2.1 it has already been shown that Baudelaire felt relief from real life in toyshops, where everything is more shiny and colorful and where life is reduced to a small orderly size. Returning to Benjamin's 'Old Toys', he perceived the attraction adults felt towards children's toys when visiting a toy exhibition in Berlin in 1928. He suspects the popularity of the exhibition did not so much have to do with the more scholarly interest in toys from various viewpoints (folklore, psychoanalysis, art history and the new education), but rather with what the adult experiences when at play. Benjamin writes:

> *We all know the picture of the family gathered beneath the Christmas tree, the father engrossed in playing with the toy train that he has given his son, the latter standing next to him in tears. When the urge to play overcomes an adult, this is not simply a regression to childhood. To be sure, play is always liberating. Surrounded by a world of giants, children use play to create a world appropriate to their size. But the adult, who finds himself threatened by the real world and can find no escape, removes its sting by playing with its image in reduced form.*[49]

Play is redemptive. Redemption is a key concept in Benjamin of Hebrew theological understanding. Although it is not always explicit the redemptive powers of childhood are related to finding access to paradise. This will be treated in the second chapter. Cornell should be placed in another cultural and religious context than Benjamin. Therefore, here I understand redemption more literal, simply as liberating from the expectations and responsibilities of adult life, which is of course an illusionary and only temporal relief. One can escape into his imagination to not worry about the realities of adult life, but it will be just

[49] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 2, 1.* 100.

for a moment. Cornell seems to have tried to sustain from entirely entering the adult life, living with his mother and 'playing' with his boxes in the garage. But we should not understand play as mere escapism. It might also offer a poetic perspective of the world, worth considering.

1.3.2. Why adults play: the power of imagination

In his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* Benjamin captured the child's power of imagination. He shows how the young Walter marvelled at and imagined the most everyday places in the city. According to Andreas Huyssen *Berlin Childhood* is indebted to the Surrealist Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* and his 'merveilleux quotidien' (the marvellous of the everyday)[50]. Considering Cornell's similar relatedness to Surrealism, this aspect of the child's capacity to surpass reality and make it into something surreal is relevant. This goes further than toys, into activities such as collecting and perception. These are activities that are discussed in the following chapters. Furthermore, Hauptman comments on Cornell's interest in childhood and its origin in Romanticisms and Surrealism. Cornell and the Surrealists took over the transformative powers from Romanticism. The poet Gérard de Nerval was a great influence on the Surrealists and probably Cornell's favourite poet[51]. Nerval was a forerunner for those who aimed to transform reality into a dreamscape.

Returning to toys, as already written above, the scientific toys of the Victorian era were meant to educate the workings of the scientific laws (such as optics, the law of gravity, laws of force etc.). But, as noted by Baudelaire, what was an unexpected asset was that people found a poetic admiration in them as well. Although the workings of the toys can be rationally explained through physics, they also awake a poetic appreciation. Toys have the

[50] Huyssen. 'Benjamin and Aragon'. 183.
[51] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 8.

ability to provoke children's and adults' imaginative receptors so they might enter these marvellous dream worlds as many artists and poets have aimed to do as well.

Although, in a very rational sense, this could be seen as another form of escapism from reality, the Surrealist's aim was exactly the opposite. Surrealism was occupied with the unconscious dimensions of humans, dimensions that might be invisible to the eye but nevertheless existing. This is thus not an escape from reality, but actually the enhancement of it. Salzani argues that Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood* shouldn't be read as some autobiographical memories, but as part of his larger project in which the child stands for a concept of experience in contrast to the bourgeois experience[52]. Benjamin does not transform Berlin into a fantastic dreamland. He rather describes it so that his felt experiences of the city are shared to show a maybe even truer face of Berlin than a mere factual description would do.

In his short piece 'Experience' a young Benjamin explains this difference in experience[53]. The adult is normally thought of as having experienced everything already. But the outcome of this is that he finds himself with the meaninglessness of life. His 'experience' tells him truth cannot be found and all his hopes and dreams were just illusions. The adult tells this to the child to prepare him for this disillusionment, but the child rarely listens. The real problem of this kind of cynical adult, which Benjamin calls the philistine, is not the having done and seen it all, but rather his disposal of his childhood dreams and his exploratory spirit and the settlement for the common and already known. Benjamin concludes that in contrast the youth does experience spirit and encounters it everywhere and in every person. This makes life not only more meaningful but the youth is also more compassionate, where the philistine is intolerant. The belief of the young in a greater truth and the child's imaginative powers are not only very enjoyable but also have a redemptive and even a

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[52] Salzani. 'Experience and Play. 175.
[53] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 1*. 3-5.

binding force. 'Experience' is just a beginning of Benjamin's conception of experience. It is much more profound than this and it is returned to in the following chapters.

Cornell's interest in toys is only part of a much wider interest in childhood; their innocence and the way children experience the world was what he tried to grasp. It is therefore that Ashton recognizes in Andersen Cornell's spiritual brother[54]. Andersen is seen as a children's writer, but he aimed at a public of all ages. Cornell liked to believe children were his perfect public[55]. But the actual strength of his work is not only to incite the child's imagination, but also to reawaken the child in the adult. Returning to Cornell's *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)* the imaginative power is addressed. Where the philistine might look at this box for a few seconds, see nothing but sewing kit material and walk off to the next work on display, a youthful spirit would keep looking and might think up all kinds of relations as described in 1.1.1. Cornell offers to his viewers to reencounter his or her child's gaze and through it recognize a world full of wonder in his rather small displays.

1.3.3. Why adults play: recovering what is lost

A last aspect that cannot be left undiscussed is the repetitive nature of Cornell's work. He did not just make separate boxes but often found it necessary to make series. There are a variety of objects (like spirals, balls, shells, mirrors) that keep returning across his complete works. Furthermore, he often reworked his boxes, proving of a difficulty to finish a project and move on to the next. What was the necessity to repeat objects and acts? Was it perfectionism? Maybe.

With Freud's remarks in mind, and although it is mere psychological speculation from my part, the loss of his father at an early age must have made a shattering impact on Cornell. It is a loss that could never be recuperated. Through his box-making and reworking he might

[54] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 5.
[55] Ibid. 4.

have felt this redemptive effect of play that children discover when taking on an active role in their play, where they had to be passive in real life. It might be for this reason Cornell never really outgrew childhood. Play for the adult can be understood for the search of meaning. To understand oneself and his or her relation to the world lived in. Cornell transformed toy and entertainment objects so they became something else, mechanisms to stimulate the imagination, so that not only the child, but moreover the adult rediscovers play and with it his or her youthful spirit. Concluding, one could look at Cornell's microcosmoses not so much to escape in them but rather to encounter a certain ordering of things that at the same time refer to the ordering of life and the world itself.

2. *Solomon Islands*: collecting and transforming

This second chapter continues the argument for seeing Cornell's work as related to children's pastime. Toys and play are discussed in the first chapter. Here I comment the act of collecting which many children take up during their childhood in some way. I will argue that Cornell's collecting was done as children do, intuitively. The point of departure is again an analysis of a work that can be seen as exemplary for the theme discussed. Following, I add a more theoretical explanation of how collecting is linked to the children's way of relating to the world. Thirdly, I return to Cornell to show how he then can be seen as a collector, and how collecting is part of his working process. The questions of this chapter are: how did Cornell assemble his collections into concrete artworks? What does it mean to collect? What is evoked through these works when seen as results of collecting and containing?

2.1 From collection to artwork

In this first section I comment on *Solomon Islands,* one of Cornell's work that is in itself a tiny collection. First, I describe the work through a visual analysis. This description clarifies all the objects and images one can find in this box, but also creates uncertainties about the objects and their relations to places far away. Therefore, in the second subsection I explain these confusing references to travel, space and time. Lastly I comment on Cornell's actual voyages, the ones through his own city. It was during these trips when Cornell gathered objects and imagery. These hunts for images and things are the origin of the boxes.

2.1.1 *Solomon Islands*: real places as fictions, fictions more truthful than reality

Solomon Islands (Fig. 10a and 10b) is a rather medium sized box, having similar measurements as other Cornell boxes. Different than most of them, this one is displayed

horizontally. This display is characteristic to the series it belongs to, regularly called ‘sailor boxes’. *Solomon Islands* consists of a dark wood rectangular box with a top that can be lifted from the front side. When done so one can see the inner side of the top is covered with an old map of, presumably, the Solomon Islands, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. Inside the box lays a lid filled with twenty compasses. But here the viewer again, as with *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest),* is not to be pleased too fast, and should interfere. The compass-filled lid can be removed, to discover a colorful collection of small objects. To the ‘Marbles, buttons, thimbles, dice, pins, stamps, and glass beads’ one can add fish, shells, starfish, butterflies, coral, birds, flowers, feathers, seahorses, seaweed, twigs, leaves and bark. Most of these things are actual things that one might find at the shores of the oceans. But the Cockatoo is a printed image, the tiny fish in the upper left corner does not seem real, in the lower right corner is something that looks like a tiny plastic wineglass and there is a small package tied together with string. It actually is merely some rubble that is spread over this compartmented box, but then is saved as a sort of treasure chest.

There is something childish about *Solomon Islands.* Later I will comment on the relation between the collector and the child. But the box itself has also something toy-ish, like a board game. Ursula Seibold-Bultmann recognizes a similarity of Cornell’s sailor boxes and nineteenth-century geographical games for children[56]. The toy motif thus returns here as well. But again, this is not a simple game box. It evokes the child’s spirit, but is also full of Cornell’s enigmatic symbolism.

The maps, compasses and souvenirs, evoke experiences of travel. Considering the title, *Solomon Islands,* the islands shown on the map are exactly not these islands but several island groups to the southwest. To be more geographically correct, Julia Kelly helps to point out that this map shows the eastern part of ‘mainland’ Papua New Guinea and the Louisiade

[56] Seibold-Bultmann. ‘Joseph Cornell’s “Object”’. 554.

Archipelago[57]. These kinds of inaccuracies are also present in the Medici series for example, of which not all portrayed are actual Medici family members, but members of other prosperous families. According to Kelly this inaccuracy of naming the location suggests that referring to reality (in this case the naming the actual geographical place) was not what was important for Cornell. In the top right corner of the map, however, 'Solomon Islands' is written and Cornell might have simply presupposed that these figures on the map were the Solomon Islands. After all, there was no Google Maps in his days.

The objects in the compartmented box do allude to islands such as those around the equator in the Pacific Ocean. Exotic birds, shells, coral, and fish evoke a landscape of rainforests, beaches and oceans full of colorful life. This little collection looks like a box with souvenirs of some adventurous traveler. Or material collected on a scientific expedition, since the compartments could be seen as the beginning of a classification of flora and fauna. With the observations made in the previous chapter in mind, one could say that children's ordering of the experienced world through play is partly extended into the attempt of scientists to make sense of materials and their relations. But, in the case of *Solomon Islands,* there is not much sense to it. There is nothing concrete to be learned about any of these objects. It is as with the scientific toys discussed above, that Cornell was not so much occupied with the actual science that was to be learned from these toys, but rather their enchanting side effects. In this way the expeditions made for biologic discovery did not interest so much for the actual scientific proof that could be found, but rather the adventure itself and the experience to find truth through actual (living) things.

A curious fact is that Cornell probably never left his home state, New York, and he definitely never went abroad. Nevertheless his work is full of allusions to other places and travel, mostly to Europe (and especially France). For a recluse as Cornell his boxes might

[57] Kelly. 'Sights Unseen'. 79.

have been a way of recreating imaginary travels to faraway places. His travels are fictions, as he was primarily influenced by literature. Kelly explains Cornell's voyages to 'sights unseen' and their derivations of writers like Raymond Roussel and Michel Leiris[58]. These last two did actually travel. But, as Kelly extends, Roussel had the tendency to not write about the actual places visited, and rather wrote 'impressions' which later on were picked up by the Surrealists, probably for their fantastic character. It is in this sense that one could look at *Solomon Islands.* The box does not deal so much with the actual place, but rather the visions one could have had, regardless of having actually been there or not. Therefore the mistaken map is neither really any problem. What is evoked is the experience of travel, not the actual voyage.

Kelly explains that the small package contains French agricultural statistics. In another compartment there is a map of Trieste. What both the French package and the map of an Italian city are doing here is difficult to explain. Considering its colonial past, the English mostly colonized the Solomon Islands; the French and Italian have never had any part. But this is again probably a too factual approach. As Kelly suggests, these objects are not only souvenirs for the traveler him- or herself, but also can offer an imaginary journey for the persons at home[59]. The package thus might also implicate the sending of objects, categorizations, and statistics to the home front of the imaginary traveler. The objects are as a vessel in which to travel to faraway places. This effect of opening up an imaginary world is similar as that described earlier for *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest).* Although the landscape created here is not that of a fairytale, but rather an earthly paradise.

A fact that cannot be left unnoted is that the year Cornell finished the box, 1942, was in the middle of World War II. It was in this year that in the seas surrounding the Louisiade Archipelago and the Solomon Islands the Battle of Coral Sea raged between the Japanese

[58] Ibid. 74.
[59] Ibid. 81.

against the United States and Australian forces. Although New York City was not a direct frontline of this war, it must have impacted Cornell. The artist never made any clear political statements and in *Solomon Islands* there is not any reference to war and violence. But the year and place treated are too coincidental to be meaningless. Therefore Kelly suggests this battle might be a hidden point of reference[60]. In spite of Cornell's efforts to offer fantasy worlds, there is no actual escape from the real one. But it was neither escapism that Cornell is looking for.

2.1.2. Travel: expeditions to Manhattan

As said above, Cornell never travelled abroad. But there was one journey he made uncountable times, that from Queens to and through Manhattan. These journeys were so rich for Cornell that it might equal the experience of someone that travelled the globe. The emphasis that I try to put on defining 'experience' is a main thread throughout this thesis, and this 'experience' can be accomplished in various ways. Cornell related to the world in its details, zooming in on it. Where the globetrotter wants to touch upon all the continents to gain full experience of this planet, Cornell looked for this wholeness in what his city, just that piece of earth, had to offer. This proved to be quite a lot.

When in Manhattan, Cornell visited museums, cinemas, libraries, theaters, dime stores, bookshops, and secondhand shops. Sylvie Ramond and François-René Martin have focused on his 'expeditions' to museums, which they describe as a journey of a pilgrim or a hunt for images[61]. Ramond and Martin also point out that the New York City of Cornell's time was a 'gathering place of what used to be scattered'[62]. It was a time and place where objects and imagery from very diverse universes came together. Here different geographical

[60] Ibid. 80.
[61] Ramond and Martin. 'Museums, Muses'. 34.
[62] Ibid. 35.

places, different historical eras, but also the, until then, divided universes of high art and popular culture could meet. The U.S. museums took up what the European Museums neglected[63]. It was in the New York City of the first half of the twentieth century that Cornell could become the gatherer he was. The objects were just there and, as Ramond and Martin note, it is apparent that they grew less since the fifties, as his boxes became much emptier since then. His work thus was directly connected with his environment and the availability of objects.

The other curiosity is that Cornell seemed to make no distinction between the experiences he had in the train, at the museum, in the cinema, walking down the streets, or at the thrift store. Ramond and Martin point out that Cornell did not visit only art museums, but to a similar extent went to natural history museums[64]. Furthermore, in his youth Cornell several times visited the Eden Museé, a place of entertainment known as a 'dime museum', where sensational curiosities combined with 'freak shows' were exposed[65]. At the turn of the twentieth century these centers already started to disappear and made place for vaudevilles, which Cornell also was familiar with. These very distinct collections of art history, natural history and sensational pop culture are all clearly mirrored in Cornell's boxes. When, for example, considering *Solomon Islands* especially the influence from the natural history museum is recognizable. It has something of a miniature museum presenting the voyage of some famous biologist. But it is only the forms that Cornell used; there is no reference to any real expedition.

Besides natural history, art history was another source of inspiration that is related to collecting. The genre of the still life in particular, which in some cases also depicted the treasures, brought home from faraway places. Waldman mentions that Cornell emulated on

[63] Ibid. 36.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid. 37.

the works of the nineteenth century U.S. still life painters William Harnett and John Frederick Peto who pictured ordinary and everyday objects[66]. Accumulations of many sorts can be found everywhere in the history of art. But, as said in the previous chapter, Vermeer was Cornell's most consistent inspiration. There were several paintings by the Dutch master painter to be found in New York City, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at the Frick Collection. But Cornell also knew other works from different locations through reproductions. Simple proof of that is his use of a reproduction of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (then and now located at the Mauritshuis in The Hague) in his box *Grand Hotel Bon Port.* In Vermeer's painting one sees various objects spread through its interiors, including maps and globes. The shared interest in cartography is also obvious.

Returning to the act of bringing home souvenirs, these objects form a medium for memory, a memory of an experience, even when not present to the time and place of the event itself. Ramond and Martin call Cornell's boxes 'theatres of memory'[67]. They refer either to real people and places or imaginary ones. In *Solomon Islands* Cornell refers to a real place, but there is no reference to an event or person to make its history complete. Another example of these surreal (here literal as 'not relating to reality') theatres of memory is the box *L'Egypte de Mlle Cléo de Mérode* (Fig. 11). In this case Cornell connects the French dancer Cléopâtre-Diane de Mérode to Egypt, whose first name of course brings to mind Cleopatra of ancient Egypt. Both women were famous for their exceptional beauty. The bottles that are kept in the box supposedly contain all kinds of curiosities; references to grasshoppers and locusts, measurement instruments for the Nile, combined with a rolled up photo of De Mérode. This is a play of allusions that does not make any sense to the adult's mind, but is imaginary in that of a child.

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[66] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 24.
[67] Ramond and Martin. 'Museums, Muses'. 39.

The mixture of childlike and urban experience is also found in Benjamin's writing on Berlin as he saw it when he was a child. Hauptman comments shortly on how Cornell, similarly to Benjamin in his 'A Berlin Chronicle', found the relation between the experiences of urban spaces with that of childhood memories was what enchanted these cities. It was through this relation that Cornell could make from the refuse of urban life works that are simultaneously toy, homage, souvenir, and map[68]. The toy aspect has already been widely discussed in chapter one. The homage aspect is treated by Hauptman through Cornell's homage's to movie stars, but is also found in works dedicated to ballerinas or other people. The assemblages of Cornell are also collections of souvenirs as can be seen in *Solomon Islands.* But these are not souvenirs from these pacific islands, but actually, like in all of his works, souvenirs from Manhattan. Cornell's works always consist of accumulated objects or imagery. Hauptman recognizes that with these objects found in the city centre a kind of psychogeographical map is created[69]. Guy Debord elaborated the concept of such a map later on in 1955 in the context of the Situationist International. A psychogeographical map is not a map that guides around a place, but rather a map, which connects places of personal importance through the memories of experiences lived there. *Solomon Islands* also refers to maps, and the objects in the box can be seen as such a personal mapping of Cornell. His universe, however, not only consists of concrete places and lived experiences, but also dreamed voyages and imagined encounters.

So in reality Cornell's souvenirs from supposed faraway places are actually souvenirs from New York City. The hodgepodge of things and imagery was in that time and place such that they were characteristic of this city that was on the verge of becoming the new art capital of the western world. Although Cornell did not refer to his city directly, his work is full of it. There are very few references to the emblematic parts of the city, the Statue of Liberty, the

[68] Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* 147.
[69] Ibid. 149.

Empire State Building or other architectural highlights (one of the scarce examples of some images of Manhattan architecture in Cornell's work can be found in *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)* (Fig. 8)). The portraits of New York City that Cornell (accidentally) made consist of a collection of objects found in that city at a certain time. These assembled collections on the one hand are realistically impossible combinations, alluding to imaginative travel, but on the other hand they are real evidence of a time and place: New York City in the first half of the twentieth century. Cornell just worked with what was available, but the unexpected side effect of this was that he became a peculiar archivist of his time and place.

Cornell could be described as a *flâneur*. He did not go to the museums just to stop by the masterpieces, but rather to discover or rediscover various objects exposed there. He stumbled along places where the refuse of the city could be found, second hand bookstores, dime stores and thrift stores. There he found objects to collect and objects that he would assemble in his boxes. The flâneur has a certain childlike aspect to him, which he combines with the knowledge of an old man, aimless wandering around with an eye for triviality and detritus. Cornell did not literally portray his experiences in Manhattan in his boxes, but the boxes are the result of those outings. They are material proof of what one could gather at that moment and time. If Cornell lived in another time his boxes would have looked different.

2.1.3 Cornell, the collector

That Cornell was a fervent collector and archivist of objects, imagery and books is a fact. At the time of his death at least some 162 files were found at the studio in his garage. It was packed with cardboard boxes and around the house he kept his library of books. Ramond and Martin show that many works originated especially from the files. He first seemed to collect various kinds of imagery under themes or whatever relation he saw fit. The files were labeled

with titles such as ‘Metaphysics of Ephemera’, ‘Center of a Labyrinth’, or ‘Museum without Walls’. Titles like these allude to mental or physical, opened and closed spaces, which formed theatres for Cornell’s experiences to be shared.

The form of the box itself also reminds of the collector’s cabinet. As explained in the first chapter, the formal aspects of Cornell’s artworks are lent from various playthings and here I aim to show that these two forms are simultaneously applicable to the work. Although the cabinet of curiosities as such was not yet academically defined during Cornell’s lifetime, he must have been familiar with such categorizations of objects that could be found in natural history museums. As Bann explains it might be that Cornell did not consciously take over the physique of the cabinet for his boxes, but he definitely had the psychology of a collector[70]. As said before, the objects that he collected must have had some nostalgic value for Cornell. Through his collecting he made a mental universe that is somewhat enigmatic for the viewer since he or she is of course outside Cornell’s mind. But it is neither completely closed since we can recognize similar interests or have associations with the presented objects and imagery.

Waldman adds other references to this formal comparison of the Cornell box and the cabinet. She comments that other Surrealists used boxes as well[71]. Although, if one searches for ‘Surrealism box’ in an online search engine what comes up primarily is Cornell and his creations. Furthermore, Waldman writes, boxes can be found in eighteenth and nineteenth century still lives and in Victorian homes. It was the idea of the box as treasure chest that interested Cornell. This idea of the treasure chest is recognizable in *Solomon Islands* with its carefully arranged objects. Although the objects themselves are not worth much on the regular market, through the transformation Cornell gives them they are elevated to artworks that are auctioned up to a few million dollars nowadays. Nevertheless, for Cornell the world

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[70] Bann. ‘Cornell’ 26.
[71] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 23.

of things attracted him not for financial, but rather for emotional reasons. Waldman describes Cornell as a hypersensitive person who could be thrilled by random occurrences and trivial objects.

Ashton points out that Cornell was not only influenced by Romanticism and Symbolism but also by 'a homely American nostalgia'[72]. This manifests itself primarily in his love for the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Noteworthy is that Dickinson neither travelled away from home and also lived a rich life through her creative work. Ashton notes their similar poetic interests in the attraction of the intangible, the wonder of the small and the natural world. They both combined the real with the imaginary and where Dickinson saw words were like things, Cornell found things could function as words. Hence his 'visual poetry' as Paz described it.

2.2. Thoughts on children's collecting

In the previous section I have explained that Cornell's collecting and assembling was a rather surreal gathering. But what is the point of such accumulating that does not seem to make much sense at first sight? To get a fuller understanding of what is happening in his boxed collections it can be interesting to look at what collecting actually is. Again I turn to Walter Benjamin for help. In the first subsection I focus on Benjamin's writings on children's collecting and how the child is attracted to debris. Following I explain how Benjamin recognized that children have a different access to the thing than the adult. Thirdly, the renewal of the object through collecting it is discussed. The elaboration of the concept of collecting and the object will later on be applied again to Cornell in the third section of this chapter.

[72] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 38.

2.2.1. The attraction of debris

One of Benjamin's small pieces in *Berlin Childhood,* called 'Cabinets', gives an idea of the various things the young Walter was obsessed with. He collected things such as butterflies, postcards, gold medallions from cigar boxes, stones, flowers, chestnuts, tinfoil, building blocks, cactuses, copper pennies and who knows what more. Some of these things are collected, understandably, for their beauty. Other things might be seen as of little value, such as the medallions from cigar boxes, tinfoil or building blocks. But it was also Benjamin who clearly pointed out that it was especially the appeal of the unwanted that attracted children. In 'Old Forgotten Children's Books' Benjamin wrote:

> *They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.*[73]

Objects that are unwanted and discarded by the adult still have the ability to interest children. Treating this same passage Salzani explains that this recognition of detritus by the child is in contrast with the bourgeois attraction to the fetishized commodity[74]. The child saves these discarded objects and gives them a second life. In chapter one I explained how it is not the toy that incites play, but the child who creates his own play according to his needs or desires. This means that to play a child is not necessarily in need of a toy. The detritus can be just as amusing, or even more so.

Just prior to the cited passage, Benjamin writes that since the Enlightenment the focus of education has been on transforming children 'who were creatures of nature in its purest form, into the most pious, the best, and the most sociable beings of all'[75]. In his days,

[73] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 1*. 408.
[74] Salzani. 'Experience and Play'. 181.
[75] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 1*. 407.

Benjamin recognized a modern prejudice, according to which ‘children are such esoteric, incommensurable beings that one needs quite exceptional ingenuity in order to discover ways of entertaining them’[76]. According to Benjamin, the pedagogues of his time look over the simple fact that the world is full of already existing objects that attract children’s attention. Their attraction to the waste as described in the passage above shows this.

2.2.2. The access to the world of things

The other aspect of the cited passage is that through recognizing refuse, children gain true access to the ‘world of things’. This special ‘access’, of children to things, is a returning obsession in Benjamin’s writing. Salzani explains that according to Benjamin, as he wrote in ‘On Language as such and on the Language of Man’, (adult) humans lost their access to nature after the fall of paradise. This was when the things lost their names as given by God (*Eigennamen*) and consequently were ‘overnamed’ by the many languages of men[77]. This in the belief that God’s naming corresponds to the true knowledge of the thing. But Benjamin’s religious and linguistic ideas are merged with Romanticism. Through the Romantic idea of the child’s receptivity as pure and directed at the world, Benjamin recognized that children had an access to the prelapsarian condition, which enables true access to things[78]. Children, when, for example, immersed in their illustrated books or when learning intuitively, access this condition. They possess the ‘secret password’ to access the lost paradise and ‘memorize without yearning’. In contrast, the adult is full of yearning. The adult suffers from what the German Romantics called the *Sehnsucht der Sehnsuchten,* i.e. the yearning for paradise, a yearning to be without yearning[79].

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[76] Ibid. 408
[77] Salzani. ‘Experience and Play’. 178.
[78] Ibid. 180.
[79] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 1*. 265.

From the 1930s Benjamin adds to this Romantic thought on children a revolutionary dimension. As said before, through the child's collection the object finds redemption from commodity. But if the adult would pick up the signals from the child it might also get a glimpse of the prelapsarian world, which is potentially redemptive and revolutionary[80]. The child improvises creatively and inventively; the child is active. Buck-Morss says that it is exactly the bourgeois education that defeats the child as revolutionary subject[81]. But Benjamin is interested in what the adult could (re)learn from the child, instead of trying to transform the child ultimately into a philistine (i.e. the adult undone of his childhood dreams and spirit).

2.2.3 Collecting as renewal

Returning to the theme of collecting, Benjamin himself was also a fervent collector, mostly of books. His piece 'Unpacking my Library' treats this habit and the worth of it. Again, Benjamin comments the childlike aspect of collecting, but adds it is mingled with the knowledge of old age'[82]. He writes that children are capable of renewing the existing. One of the ways children renew the old is through collecting. Other ways of renewal are the painting of objects, the cutting out and the applying of one thing to the other. Or even by touching things or naming them. According to Benjamin it is this renewal, 'to renew the old world', that is the deepest desire of the collector. It is therefore that he is interested in the collection of older books and not in luxury editions. What this commentary shows is that collecting is not just occupied with the past and its conservation, but just as much with the renewal of that past and thus the present and future. Collecting means recognizing the worth of the old or the abandoned for uses in the here and now and beyond.

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[80] Ibid. 189.
[81] Buck-Morss. *The Dialectics of Seeing.* 265.
[82] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 3*. 487.

2.3. Cornell as childlike collector

In this section the previous two will be combined to see how Benjamin's comments on collecting can illuminate how to look at Cornell's boxes. First I return to Cornell's attraction to abandoned objects. To this I add a comment to the question if Cornell, as adult, had the same access to the world of things as children. Furthermore, I propose that Cornell had the capability to renew the old by assembling his collected objects and imagery.

2.3.1 Cornell's *Sehnsucht*

As has been discussed before, Cornell gathered his objects and imagery from various places in Manhattan. Although these objects were not exactly trash, they were neither very desired nor precious objects. Mostly, Cornell collected paraphernalia that on itself would not require the attention of many adults. But Cornell was very attentive and employed a certain childlike gaze in the benjaminian sense.

As Benjamin wrote, the adult suffers from a yearning to be without yearning in contrast to the child who still is able to relate him or herself to the world without preoccupations. Ashton applies the Romantic term 'Sehnsucht' as characteristic for the artist[83]. Cornell should be understood as the adult; he does suffer from a desire to be in places and times not his own or even imaginary (like the fictions of cinema or fairytales). It was through his work that Cornell tried to still this desire. Through the childlike collecting and relating to things he might have found some relief.

With this yearning adult in mind I suggest that the treasure chest that is *Solomon Islands* therefore refers to the longing itself, even though that yearning is not very specific. It is not that Cornell had a deep desire to visit the Solomon Islands; it is just a visual way to

[83] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 10.

allude to the abstract idea of *Sehnsucht der Sehnsuchten.* The Solomon Islands are portrayed as an earthly paradise, but it is not necessary to travel there to have access to it. Following Benjamin's belief in the particular access to the world which children are able to obtain, the adult might find only such redemption in the things surrounding him or herself by looking from a child's perspective.

2.3.2. The Cornell box as transforming cage of renewal and aging.

Just as Benjamin with his collection of books, I recognize in Cornell a similar aim to transform the objects through his collecting and assembling. This is to renew the old (much of these objects were second-hand) but also to recognize the worth of the old and the abandoned. Curious is that Cornell did not just introduce used and aged objects but also artificially aged newer objects. An example that Hauptman gives is that Cornell put some of the works in the oven so the wood set out and the paint cracked to give it a much older look[84]. He does not only give objects a second life but also gives new objects a previous life. The renewal of the old is a way of accessing the past, but the aging of the new as well.

It was through an attentive approach to his surroundings in combination with the manipulation and representation of his findings that Cornell tried to find a greater sense in his life. In the following chapter I will extend on this approach to the world and what this manner of experiencing the world means more deeply.

[84] Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* 40.

3. *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set):* the modern experience

In the third and last chapter I aim to demonstrate what the results and the effects of Cornell's toys and collecting have to offer. Departing from another of his works, *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*, I illuminate how the two previous focal points of play and collecting come together in function of a transcendentalism that Cornell strived for to visualize. As in the other chapters I first describe the artwork in detail. Secondly, I complement the analysis of the artwork with a theoretical comment. Here, on the concept of 'experience' as developed by Benjamin. This is interesting since his conception of 'experience' forms certain dialectic between play and science that is similarly evoked by Cornell. In the third section I return to Cornell's work to show how the concept of benjaminian 'experience' can enrich the interpretations of the artist's creations. The questions of this chapter are: How does Cornell combine play and science in his artwork? What does 'experience' mean in modernity? Why is Cornell's gaze important?

3.1. Where science and poetry meet

This section serves to show how play and collecting (as discussed in the previous two chapters) are also forms used by scientists and how Cornell related to this scientific view of the world. First I give a formal description of the box *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)* and mention some art historical inspirations for the theme of the soap bubble. In the second part, I comment shortly on Cornell's preoccupation with natural science, which will be returned to later on in the third section of this chapter.

3.1.1. *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*: the bubble as world

Untitled (Soap Bubble Set) (Fig. 12) is one of the earliest boxes Cornell made in the rather standard measurements of around 40 by 30 centimeters. It is a wood box, lined with silk,

which once was cobalt blue but now the color has faded. The background is covered with a French map of the earth's moon. In front of the map just underneath the picture of the moon lays a clay pipe. Under this pipe are three compartments, each with a flat round glass. To the left there is a slender cone shaped wineglass with an egg in it. To the right side of the image of the moon is a white pillar with a doll's head on it. In the upper compartment four white cylinders hang from the upper side of the box. The left cylinder is printed with a picture of a horseman on a rearing horse entangled with what seems to be a planet with a ring system, what Saturn is famous for. The outer right cylinder carries an image of an overview of an ancient city square with a leaning tower; in the sky is a rather huge planet, also with a ring system. The middle two cylinders are plain white. Glass walls divide all seven compartments.

This work belongs to a series of soap bubble boxes, Cornell's most extensive series. The one discussed here, *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)* from 1936, is the first and most referred to of this series. The hint Cornell gives the viewer in the title is 'soap bubble', recognizable in the form of the moon, as if blown out of the clay pipe. The idea of the soap bubble is the key for interpreting the work further. There are symbolic explanations as given by Waldman who ascribes the pipe as reference to Manhattan and its past, the egg to life, the glass as the cradle of that life, the four cylinders as Cornell's family (his mother, brother and two sisters), the doll's head as Cornell himself and the moon as both soap bubble and world[85]. In this chapter I will principally focus on the central reference, that of the moon as soap bubble and simultaneously as world.

The toy element returns in this work as well. Although the box itself here is rather expository and not to be handled, the blowing of soap bubbles is a popular children's pastime. Children blow soap bubbles probably since soap's invention. The blowing of bubbles is not only play but also has a scientific aspect to it, as have the optical toys

[85] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 25.

discussed in chapter one. And again, that science goes accompanied by a marvelous dimension. The soap bubble represents an ideal form for Cornell, since it is full of reference to the ephemeral, the transient and at the same time the cosmic. He relates such varying elements as rock solid celestial bodies and soap bubbles, the infinite and the transient. The bubble has a perfect form (the circle), but is about to pop at any moment. The form of a circle is also infinite, but at the same time an enclosed space. These frictions are recognizable in Cornell's work, which tries to contain the transient and allude to infinity through small and contained spaces.

Waldman explains that in genre painting the soap bubble represented a metaphor for the transitory nature of life and the vanity of all earthly things[86]. She also mentions Cornell was familiar with Jean Siméon Chardin's *Soap Bubbles* (1733-34), which was (and is) part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art[87]. Hoving mentions another work he surely knew was *Boys Blowing Bubbles* by Michaela Wautier (previously ascribed to Jacob van Oost)[88]. But there are numerous works with children blowing bubbles which Cornell might have been familiar with like Édouard Manet's *Boy Blowing Bubbles*, John Everett Millais' *Bubbles*, or Frans van Mieris' *Boy Blowing Bubbles*.

3.1.2. The science of the soap bubble

Ashton points out that one of Cornell's favorite books was *Soap Bubbles, Their Colors and the Forces Which Mold Them* by the physicist Charles Vernon Boys[89]. This was not the only text he read on the subject. Hoving studied Cornell's interest in the cosmos and published her findings in *Joseph Cornell and Astronomy: A Case for the Stars*. In one of the chapters she discusses his soap bubble boxes. Hoving adds that Cornell had various volumes on soap

[86] Ibid. 28.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Hoving. *Joseph Cornell.* 37.
[89] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 93.

bubbles, including popular science books. But Hoving also underlines the book of Boys since in it the physicist mentioned the similarity in form between the soap bubbles and the planets, a comparison that she says must have triggered Cornell[90]. Nevertheless, Boys precisely adverts that the forces that work upon the bubble and the planet are unrelated. In short, scientifically this comparison does not make sense, but poetically it has potential. Cornell exploited the last, as is visible in *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)* where he presents the image of a celestial body, the Earth's moon as if it were a soap bubble blown out of the pipe[91]. They both seem to float in space but their movements are actually defined by strict natural laws of force.

Hoving shows that the images on the cylinders are references to some of Galileo's discoveries: the centers of gravity and the rings of Saturn[92]. The rearing horse and the leaning tower are positions of living beings and big constructions that find their centers of gravity. Galileo also described how the rings of Saturn, when neatly aligned with earth, are merely a thin line and thus almost invisible for the earthling, although the rings of course are still there. But, Hoving continues, Cornell's use of images of Saturn also refers again to bubbles. Physicist Joseph Plateau showed how liquid drops when spun fast enough, form rings, calling to mind the ice and rocks circling Saturn[93]. To make full circle, Plateau also was the inventor of one of the earlier precinematic toys, the phenakistiscope. This device was useful to show certain workings in physics, such as the changing form of a soap bubble. This is a clear example of how science and play are intertwined. Hoving thus shows Cornell was interested in this friction and made use of the hidden poetics behind natural science. She continues mentioning that similarly, scientists make use of the principles of play and the beauty of natural phenomena to communicate their findings. Descriptions of physical forces are often

[90] Hoving. *Joseph Cornell.* 30.
[91] Ibid. 31.
[92] Ibid. 32, 33.
[93] Ibid. 33.

described with metaphors, such as 'the universe is expanding like a soap-bubble'[94]. These were the kind of allusions that made Cornell's mind marvel.

3.2. Thinking 'experience'

In this second section I explore the relations between science and play further. To do so I lean again on the writings of Benjamin. His concept of 'experience' in this context is interesting since it treats to explore such mediation between objective and subjective experience. But his concept also is characteristic for his and Cornell's time, modernity, and the problematic they faced relating to past, present and future. First, I explain what Benjamin's concept of 'experience' consists of. Added by why he saw the need to elaborate the already existing with such a new conception. Thirdly, I explain how Benjamin recognized the bond between experience and memory, its threat by modernity and its importance.

3.2.1. 'Experience' as immersion

Benjamin's interest in children's occupations, according to Salzani (and I find his argument convincing), is part of a bigger philosophical quest. Benjamin tried to establish a concept of experience that rejects both the Kantian *Erfahrung* and its opposite Diltheyan *Erlebnis*[95]. Said very briefly, the first is understood as the empirical experience of the scientific subject and the second mistrusts objective concepts. Experience, according to Dilthey, is interior and of the pre-rational subject. Benjamin searches for a middle ground between these two conceptions of experience, surpassing the object-subject distinction. In 'The Early Romantic Theory of the Knowledge of Nature' (part of Benjamin's 1919 doctoral thesis *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*) he finds a possible solution in the writing of Novalis. Knowledge of the object is obtained immediate, through a process of partial

[94] Ibid. 38
[95] Salzani. 'Experience and Play'. 178.

‘interpenetration’ of the object and subject[96]. This means that to observe is to evoke self-consciousness in the thing observed, to make from the object another subject. Therefore the observer does not pose questions but rather listens to nature through its ‘secret password’. Benjamin recognizes in children’s behavior (play, collecting, manipulation of material etc.) such manner of relating to the world, getting immersed in it. According to Benjamin this immersion with the world is something that most adults do not experience anymore, but which is worth recuperating[97].

3.2.2. The double face of modernity

Salzani clearly explains the centrality of the concept of experience in Benjamin’s writing. But he also points out the ambiguity of the concept. This ambiguity refers to the ‘Janus-faced Benjamin’ who looks simultaneously at the past and the future[98]. Benjamin’s thinking is full of nostalgia for a lost authenticity but also with wonder for future promise. The figure of the child is ideal for this double functioning since the child reminds us of our past and the ‘authentic’ experience it represents. But the child is also the promise for the future, someone who will live beyond our times. It is in this sense that the ideas on children and childhood came to function very well in postulating a concept for experience that is more complete and includes both the yearning for the past and the hope for the future. This double sidedness was characteristic of Benjamin’s time. Modernity was liberating and revolutionary, but also still occupied with the past[99].

Benjamin’s positive outlook on modernity is articulated in his 1933 essay ‘Experience and Poverty’. He starts out by writing that no one knows anymore what experience is and even less how to communicate it. This loss of authentic experience is accompanied with the

[96] Ibid. 179.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid. 175.
[99] Ibid. 190.

technological advancements that were influencing life in many aspects and to a growing extent. But ultimately, Benjamin concludes, this loss of the old ways of men is no reason to weep. It can be a possibility for renewal, to reinvent the human's place in the world. Destruction is needed prior to rebuild.

Benjamin's more pessimistic treatise on the same subject can be found in the 1936 essay 'The Storyteller'. He exposes the situation similarly as in 'Experience and Poverty', but in contrast does not recognize the hope for reconstruction. He elaborates on the impossibility to communicate experience in the modern world. He is weary for the loss of the wisdom of the past and preoccupied for the transformation of experience in mere information by technological development. It is the storyteller that shares experience with others, but he or she is becoming extinct. Technology together with the destruction created by World War I was what silenced the storyteller. Benjamin wrote strikingly:

> *Wasn't it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience? What poured out in the flood of war books ten years later was anything but experience that can be shared orally. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been more thoroughly be-lied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.*[100]

In this pessimistic outlook on experience in the modern world, the removal of humans from their experience might be thus damaged that Benjamin seemed to have started losing hope for humankind to rebuild. This loss of hope is understandable when taking into account the worsening situation in Europe during the 1930s.

This double face of modernity and its experience is also recognizable in the modern metropolis. The modern metropolis has its view on the future and its promise, but also evokes

[100] Benjamin. *Selected Writings 3*. 143, 144.

memories of its history and past experiences lived in certain places of the city. The modern metropolis is very stimulating for the attentive stroller. In the 1929 'The return of the Flâneur' Benjamin writes 'to know cities one must have been a child in them'. To experience a city as such is something one rather might experience in an unknown city in which one has to discover everything anew. But it is also possible in one's place of residence, as long as the childhood spirit is reawakened. The short memories found in *Berlin Childhood* are exactly such wanderings in one's own city. They are presented as the experiences of the child Walter, but were penned down by the adult Benjamin. He thus had to enter into his childhood stage to remember and to re-experience. Salzani therefore proposes that this collection of short memories is not merely autobiographical, but a certain proof of Benjamin's ideas on what experience and memory are[101]. According to Benjamin experience and memory go hand in hand.

3.2.3. Memory as the medium of the past

Salzani explains Benjamin saw memory not as an instrument to know the past, but as the medium of the past, as the theatre in which past experiences could present themselves to our present selves[102]. The city forms an apt landscape to appeal to these memories. Who wants to explore his or her past has to excavate, similarly to the archeologist[103]. Benjamin's written memories are such digging into the past.

Salzani warns that this method of remembering should be differed from the Proustian *memoire involontaire*[104]. Proust created a complete and flowing narrative. In contrast, Benjamin's memories are fragmentary and heterogeneous. Now the difference between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* can also be further explained. Salzani writes that Benjamin's

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[101] Salzani. 'Experience and Play'. 175.
[102] Ibid. 193
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid. 194.

memories are ‘not a collection of private and singular *Erlebnisse*, but rather an attempt to transform these into collective and relational *Erfahrungen*’[105]. Where Benjamin differs from Proust is that he has a certain political aim with the sharing of his memories. Through describing specific places his memories are not merely private but shared with at least other Berliners, creating a certain communal experience. He aims to rescue the interrelations between past and present, and the child and the adult. According to Salzani it is in Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* where he tried to work out this kind of historiography. This was a project that was left unfinished at the time of Benjamin’s death in 1940. But that fragmentary and infinite character might have impeded a full completion, even if he had lived to finish it.

3.3. Cornell’s theatre of memory

This last section brings together the previous two. I return to the question of the relation between play, science and experience, now with more theoretical foundation. I show how these concepts can be recognized in Cornell’s work and also how they differ. First, I concentrate on how Cornell combined science and play and how this evokes a perspective similar to that of Benjamin’s ‘experience’. Secondly, I propose Cornell also as a Janus-faced figure. Lastly, I question if Cornell’s ‘theatres of memory’ are a certain form of benjaminian historiography.

3.3.1. Cornell as alchemist

As explained in the first section of this chapter as well as throughout this thesis, Cornell was interested in natural science but rather for its poetic potential than the rationality behind it. Ashton remarkes that Cornell was interested in the methods of natural scientists, although at

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[105] Ibid.

the same time distrusted rationalism. He seems to have been interested in historic ways of obtaining knowledge; he evokes the working methods of the alchemist and the astrologer, rather than the physicist and the astronomer. The distrust in rationalism is understandable when we consider the artist's foundations in Romanticism. Just as Benjamin, Cornell had great interest in the case Novalis made for the recognition of intuition as primary source for knowing the world and how looking at the way children experience intuitively can prove this[106]. It is imaginable that Cornell, strolling the streets of Manhattan let the objects choose him rather than the other way around.

I propose that in Cornell's work there is thus a similar dialectic between objective experience (*Erfahrung)* and subjective living (*Erlebnis*) of events and objects as in Benjamin's writings. On the one hand he makes use of natural science. As has been shown throughout this thesis Cornell used optical effects (*Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)*), classification of objects and cartography (*Solomon Islands*), and gravitational forces and celestial bodies (*Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)*). On the other hand he connects personal memories of experiences thoughts and feelings with these works, the objects and where he found them. Ashton explains that Cornell felt the need to explore the spiritual order of things[107]. For him the objects are not only material, but contain spirit. His assemblages of objects are thus not so much to present these objects themselves but to allude to an interrelatedness of all things. It is rather the effects of the juxtapositions than the objects themselves that matter.

Cornell called this working method 'metaphysique d'ephemera', a term that he adopted from the poet Nerval[108]. Hauptman explains that this term to Cornell probably meant to suggest 'the supreme importance of the smallest things once the imagination transforms

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[106] Ashton. *A Joseph Cornell Album.* 51.
[107] Ibid. 71.
[108] Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* 35.

them'[109]. The banal has transcendental possibilities and the obsolete has a contemporary importance.

3.3.2. Cornell, the visionary nostalgic

It could be said that Cornell suffered from the poverty of experience as Benjamin described it. He had this urge to share his experiences, but struggled with how to do so. He was no artist in the classical sense; he had no talent in any of the art techniques and was insecure about his writing. But by some luck Cornell was born at a time the rules for art were drastically changing. The positive side to modernism, or maybe exactly because of the need for reinvention, was that new ways of art making were in fashion. It was first in the medium of collage and followed by assemblage that Cornell found a way to visualize what was in his mind. These were also the media in which Cornell could expose his sensibility of the collector. Waldman adds that this containing might have been related to Cornell's difficulty with closure, remaining a child in several ways (living with his family, sustaining from sexual relations)[110]. But he was also an adult, working jobs besides making his art until his late thirties to sustain the family, reading difficult literature and contemplating the meaning of his art.

The double face of modernity with the child as characteristic figure I also recognize in Cornell. He was obsessed with the past. Cornell has been described as an overtly nostalgic figure, but he was also a promise for the future. It did not seem his primary occupation to be at the head of the avant-garde of his time but he was far more renewing in the art world than to call him merely 'nostalgic'. Cornell's visionary was already observed by groundbreaking artists of his time, like Marcel Duchamp, who recognized a certain originality in him and his

[109] Ibid.
[110] Waldman. *Joseph Cornell.* 62.

work[111]. Various elements of Cornell's working method became commonplace in twentieth century art. In film studies Cornell is often referred to as one of video art's pioneers, inspiring big names such as Andy Warhol[112]. To see Cornell merely as a nostalgic is thus obviously incorrect. Cornell simply did not care about being past or future. McShine explains that his aim was timelessness, as Cornell wrote in his diary notes like 'This one day is an eterniday in the world I have come to be enveloped in'[113]. For Cornell infinity was to be heralded in the ephemeral. Therefore the soap bubble was his dreamed metaphor.

3.3.3. 'Open up your memories of felt time'

Bann recognizes in Cornell the preoccupation of the loss of authenticity in contemporary society[114]. His work can be seen as a protest against such dehumanization. In his closing lines he refers to Kristeva's comment on Proust and the redemptive spirit of his work about which she says 'If you will only be so good as to open up your memories of felt time, *there* will rise the new cathedral'[115]. I suggest that Proust's madeleine, which invoked memories in the writer, has a similar functioning as the cornellian object that can be seen as a souvenir and also is laden with memory. But when only the object is shown, as is the case in the Cornell box, the related memory remains unknown to the viewer. Nevertheless, Cornell felt the need to share these experiences turned into memories, probably to encounter meaning in his life. Cornell was principally occupied with the more religious aspect of finding cosmic relations between the smallest and greatest objects and events, and was not conscious of the more political load this might carry as Benjamin proposed. Benjamin also started out from

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[111] The relation between Cornell and Duchamp has been explored in an exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. See Koch. *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp.*
[112] For more on Cornell's film work see Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* and Pigott. *Joseph Cornell.*
[113] McShine. *Joseph Cornell.* 11.
[114] Bann. 'Cornell'. 30.
[115] Kristeva. *Proust.* 7.

Romantic and religious ideas to form his concept of experience, but later turned to Marxism and strove for a collective form of experience and memory that is neither purely scientific nor private and subjective. Although Cornell did not seem to have had any political goals with his work, I suggest it might have such benjaminian potential. Cornell visualized his felt time and the experience that is shared is both private and public. In his work his personal experiences and memories of childhood and of New York City provoke memories in the viewer. They might remember their childhood games, the toys they played with, the objects they collected, the walks they made etc. but also memorize the times of others, such as the Victorian child, the Renaissance child, natural scientists, even movie stars. This is how private and collective memory come together, how felt time might be shared and how, as Kristeva proposes, new cathedrals might rise (i.e. how our interrelatedness with all beings and things - something some people call God - can be rediscovered).

Hauptman already hints at seeing Cornell as a benjaminian historiographer. She points out Cornell's and Benjamin's methods of quotation or borrowing to make the past present. They both combine this with the Surrealism as Aragon employed it, to mystify the urban space in such way it can become recognizable, if only in a short instance[116]. Hauptman adds on both Benjamin's and Cornell's working method: 'In its never-ending quest for information, objects, quotations, and fragments, and the impossibility of completion or fulfillment, the logic of the archive is also the logic of desire'[117]. The desire of both men was to evoke and feel true experience (in the benjaminian sense, shared, neither subjective nor objective), and they found a principle gateway through the child's gaze. Cornell's method thus brings together past and present confusing the strict chronological sequence. As has been shown, this confusion can also offer an opening to other times.

[116] Hauptman. *Joseph Cornell.* 40.
[117] Ibid.

What I add to what Hauptman already recognized in using Benjamin to understand Cornell is that I do not apply some of his ideas separately, but rather draw out a more complex web of these ideas. I have showed how the concepts of experience, collecting and play are interrelated and how this manner of perception is what makes Cornell's work interesting.

Conclusion

As explained in the introduction, Cornell's work is already rather widely interpreted. Nevertheless I found the existing interpretations unsatisfying. In art historical context he has been mainly placed among the Surrealists, which in part is a correct placement, but he was not a typical member of the movement. Krauss recognizes Cornell's slightly different interest that was not so much in the unconscious and dreams, but rather in the exploration of the past and memory. Krauss only mentions this shortly in an overview on sculpture, I found it worthy of further exploration. How then does Cornell explore such access to the past?

Another aspect that I have pointed out in the introduction is that Cornell's work asks for an interdisciplinary approach since the sources for his work are from varying fields. Mostly his interest in literature has been pointed out. Others have focused on Cornell's interest in cinema (Hauptman) and cosmology (Hoving). I proposed to add to these interdisciplinary approaches a philosophical one. Although Cornell might not have been directly influenced by philosophy he was immersed in a certain world of ideas, mostly that of Symbolism and Romanticism, but also Surrealism. For his great love of Romanticism in a time the avant-gardes were exactly aiming to destroy such sentimentalism, Cornell has been described as overly sentimental. And perhaps he was. I do not deny that. But is there not something that might still be worthy in this manner of experience?

I found an interesting starting point in the term 'philosophical toy', a term with which Cornell and others had describes his boxes. But to describe Cornell's work as toys is also dangerous since some seem to have only recognized his boxes as amusing. This term combines the playful with the obtaining of knowledge. Also it makes one curious what is to be heralded from the play with such a toy. To explore what play means and why it is important, so much so as to make it into art, the writing of Benjamin has proven to be more

than helpful. This led to the additional result that my thesis also forms a certain illustration to the similarly enigmatic thought of Benjamin.

The central question as proposed in the introduction is: what is the philosophy behind Cornell's philosophical toys? I have tried to answer this question in the three chapters which all had their sub questions. First it was needed to explore how these artworks could be seen as toys. Secondly I recognized that Cornell's working method of collecting and containing also had something childlike, and should be related to play. Thirdly and finally a step further is taken to show how these manners of dealing with material are also recognizable in the practices of natural science and what this means for understanding what is 'experience'.

To answer these questions I have consulted existing studies on Cornell and have focused on the work and its origins. Every time I added theoretical ideas that seemed relevant to me to ultimately combine the art historical approach with the more theoretical ideas to gain a deeper insight in the workings of the philosophical toys of Cornell.

In the first section of the first chapter I have described how *Untitled (Beehive, Thimble Forest)* opens up a miniature world as in a fairy tale, when handled as a peep box. This work functions like a peep show and alludes to Cornell's interest in optical toys. Apart from these, there are many other references to toys and play to be found throughout the oeuvre. The use of the forms of play made me wonder, what actually is play? Some scholars already had mentioned Baudelaire's essay on toys in relation to Cornell's work, so I started from there. Baudelaire was fascinated by the marveling minds of children and recognized that not the toy incited play in the child, but rather the child's play made objects into toys. Benjamin continues this train of thought and adds that play thus is not so much the imitation of adult behavior but rather a first encounter and way of reacting to events and things. Play is thus the first way for children to gain possession of the self and the world. This idea is again founded on the theories of Freud. He explained how children obtain a certain control over

situations through play by reenacting lived events in which they had to be passive (such as the mother leaving the house, or a doctor's visit). I added a comment on the emancipation of the child since it was only through the nineteenth century that children started to be seen not merely as adults reduced in size. In the last part of the first chapter I tried to answer the question why then Cornell used the toy form. Partly it could be escapism. Play is redemptive, also for the adult. The recognition of the marvelous in the everyday must have been another aspect. It might have also been a way to remember and even recover the past, since through repetition as in play one can obtain a certain control over a situation in which the subject had to be passive, as with past situations one can no longer change.

In the second chapter I elongated the idea of play into collecting. Collecting, as play, is also a certain ordering of the world, but also the origin of Cornell's work. First I pointed out how *Solomon Islands* can be seen as a treasure chest or a box of souvenirs from a place far away. But this place was only imaginary, Cornell did not travel outside his state and all objects he used were found in New York City. The artist made numerous expeditions through Manhattan and remained unsaturated with the offer of museums, cinemas, theatres, shops and sidewalk encounters. Apart from the act of collecting, the categorization and classification recognizable in some of the boxes allude to the working method of scientists. But Cornell did not collect things of value; rather he picked up the hopscotch found at second hand shops. The attraction of debris is what is recognizable in the child. Benjamin explains this very well and adds that this debris can be valuable. The child enjoys a special access to the world of things, which the adult has lost. This attraction to objects can evoke intuitive learning of the things that surround us, instead of the mere renaming of the already named. Furthermore, by collecting things, the objects are renewed, they might get a new function or they might be seen differently. It is this kind of childlike collector that is Cornell, or at least it might have been what he aimed for, to obtain such access to the things without mediation. What does

obviously happen in the Cornell box is that the objects put in it undergo a transformation. This can be renewal, but Cornell also artificially aged his works. Both are ways to access the past.

In the third chapter I explored what these manners of relating to the world (i.e. playing and collecting) mean for the concept of experience. In *Untitled (Soap Bubble Set)* a relation between play and the natural sciences is recognizable. Although the child and the scientist have very different ways of experience, they may be not that different after all. This made me wonder what concept of experience can be understood through the work of Cornell. Again Benjamin proved helpful in this quest. I have pointed out how he elaborated on defining a concept that is neither that of the natural scientist, nor that of a mere private and interior experience. Such a need for a new concept was understandably needed at the interwar period in which Benjamin, but also Cornell, lived (although Cornell lived with much less reason to be anxious for than Benjamin). Lastly, I interpreted Cornell as a benjaminian figure; instead of mere sentimentalist or Romantic. His work provokes nostalgia but now one can understand that part of this nostalgia is a specific access to the past and to the experiences of us and others that can be binding.

Throughout this thesis I have tried to explain how Cornell's play (which consists of toys, collecting and assembling) evokes a certain philosophy on the concept of experience. He breaks with some ideas that might be seen as standard at the time. He turns the idea of play to educate the child, into that of the adult that should relearn how to play; the idea of collecting to classify the world, into collecting to let the world present itself to us; and the idea of knowledge as something solid and complete into that of a fragmentary and only momentary knowing. Through playing with Cornell's philosophical toys the viewer does not get merely amused, rather these toys form tracks that lead to physical and mental voyages. Through playing Cornell's game another place and time, an experience can be shared. The

trick is to activate the child's gaze and be receptive for the intuitive and allusive hints that are given. This is what is offered by Cornell, who was rather a poser of questions than someone that answered them, an invitation to think and perceive the world in a way unknown, or at least forgotten with the loss of childhood.

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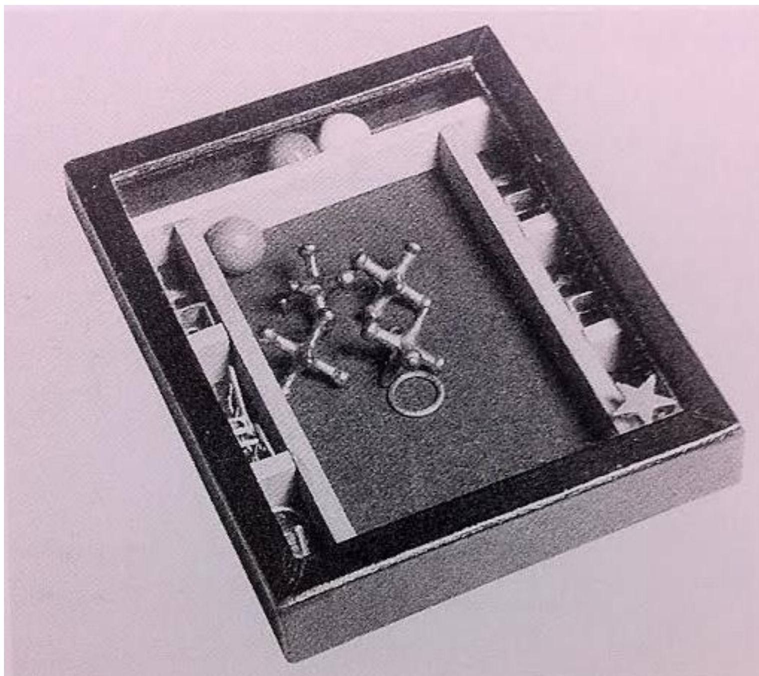

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