

What Makes a Collection Surrealist?
Twentieth-Century Cabinets of Curiosities in Paris and Houston

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The first time I entered the room entitled “Witnesses” at the Menil Collection in Houston, I had a profound sense of *déjà vu*.¹ This uncanny feeling led to my desire to identify what makes a collection surrealist, because the Witnesses room reminded me viscerally of the experience I had had twelve years earlier of visiting André Breton’s study, when I had had the good fortune to visit his apartment on the rue Fontaine in Paris, and saw the objects on his desk arranged the way he had left them when he died in 1966.² I later discovered that the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, who created the room, explicitly set out to recreate the feeling of being in “Matta’s bedroom, Breton’s apartment.”³ Carpenter achieved the combined effect he had imagined by creating a double sense of intimacy—one that conforms to the most private room in a house, a bedroom, as well as one that conforms to an artist-intellectual’s study, specifically Breton’s study. Since that initial visit to the Menil I have been working towards an explanation of what makes a collection surrealist, which I connect to my work on surrealist ghostliness, and which involves going back to the earliest European collections of objects, the baroque “cabinets of curiosities” or *Wunderkammer*.

Breton’s collection occupied his entire apartment but was particularly concentrated in his book-lined study. He intentionally mixes up Western and non-Western works in a way that not only reflects the aspiration of the original cabinets of curiosities, to “encompass and contain the whole world” but also his own, intensely personal worldview.⁴ His study in fact resembles the private baroque cabinets of curiosities or *Wunderkammern* that became popular in the baroque era because of this personal aspect that nonetheless aspires to a global reach.

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Fig. 1. Witnesses Room, Menil Collection, Back Wall. The Menil Collection, Houston; Photographer: Kent Dorn



Fig. 2. André Breton in his studio, 42, rue Fontaine, June 1955; Sabine Weiss

Wunderkammern were intended to display objects that, through the meticulous manner in which they were ordered, “represented the knowing of the world,” as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains, with reference to Michel Foucault’s work on power, knowledge, and the human subject in history, they also situated the “ordering subject” within that world.⁵ The early cabinets of curiosity were thus material manifestations of humanist thought and were deemed marvelous—a quality intentionally reactivated by the Surrealists. What Breton and the Surrealists added to this view of the world, and more particularly of the ordering subject within the world, was a psychological dimension found at once in themselves and in the material objects they collected. Paula Findlen observes that collecting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was “a precise mechanism for transforming knowledge into power,” in the sense of intellectual and scientific power. Collecting for Breton was also a reflection on power that was, at once, the slowly waning power of the colonialist French empire manifested in the objects brought back as booty, as well as the power with which many of the makers of such objects had invested them for practical use that in European terms was initially viewed as magical, even ghostly, and that the surrealists viewed as psychological:⁶ for example, Breton owned a tiki figure from the Marquesas Islands, now in the Menil’s Witnesses room, that was created to house a spirit.

Breton’s personal space follows what Abigail Susik calls the “exhibitionary matrix for Surrealism” modeled in Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), particularly in the way that *Nadja* is illustrated. In the book he presents archive-like photographs of objects in his collection and links them to a personal narrative of discovery, in a style that harks back to the baroque period’s Age of Discovery and the early days of colonialist travel and quest, a time that coincided with the creation of the original cabinets of curiosities. *Nadja*, argues Susik, follows the same aesthetic model as Breton’s heterogeneous collection, except that the distant lands Breton sought were buried within the self, with the science of psychoanalysis replacing the science of geography that fascinated early collectors. For the Surrealists the far reaches of the known world were buried within themselves, in the human psyche.⁷ In *The Age of the Marvelous*, Joy Kenseth implicitly confirms this similarity between Breton’s investigative curiosity and that of his forebears, the collectors of the *Wunderkammern*, when she writes: “the rise of collections coincided with the elevation of the status of the scholar, who no longer was a passive observer of the world but an active and engaged participant, investigating, questioning, and describing its myriad parts.”⁸ Kenseth’s evocation of the “engaged participant” from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could just as well describe Breton in 1920s Paris, with the added dimension of Breton’s interest in psychology.

Preceded by poet-collectors such as Guillaume Apollinaire, it took modernists like the Surrealists to reunite—in human-scale, globally ambitious twentieth-century *Wunderkammern*—all the categories present in the earliest museums, and that had been dispersed, in the nineteenth century, to museums of ethnography, natural history, and art. Their personal interests motivated them to seek out objects they perceived as psychologically active, having latent energies within them that caused these objects to mimic the Freudian way the Surrealists understood themselves—as having at once manifest and latent, conscious and unconscious, lives. This double nature of the objects that Surrealists collected lies at the root of what I call *ghostliness*, and is a salient feature of Surrealism contained within the rooms they inhabited, and where they produced their works.

In a memorial interview given upon the occasion of Breton's death in 1966, Foucault honors Breton by attributing to him “the discovery of a space that is not that of philosophy, nor of literature, nor of art, but that of experience” in twentieth-century thought, which Susik calls “pre-modern patterns of cognition.” Foucault was acknowledging Surrealism's concentration on *inner* experience, as at once psychological and physical, as well as on those experiences that escape psychological explanation—such as the “unbearable discomfort” Breton describes feeling in Paris's Place Maubert in *Nadja*, and that, Breton argues, escapes even psychoanalytic explanation.⁹ Sudden juxtapositions of disparate things could spur insights for Breton that might illuminate what had previously been unknown, and could work like “flashes of light that would make you see, really *see*.”¹⁰

The surrealist thirst for wonder may be what the Surrealists shared most with their collector predecessors, the creators of the *Wunderkammern*. Breton praises the marvelous explicitly in the “Manifesto,” a quality admired in medieval and baroque thought, art, and writing, linked to abrupt shifts in register, and generative of awe and the miraculous, the sort of shocks or surprises that visitors to the early cabinets of curiosities hoped to experience.¹¹ Kenseth explains how a seventeenth-century visitor to “the museum of the Danish naturalist Olé Worm reported that in this place ‘is found and can be examined with wonder, odd and curious rarities and things among which a large part has not been seen before, and many royal persons and envoys visiting Copenhagen ask to see the museum on account of its great fame and what it relates from foreign lands, and they wonder and marvel at what they see.’”¹²

Twentieth-century private precedents for this style of encyclopedic collecting embraced by Breton, include Apollinaire, who coined the word *Surrealism*, as well as Sigmund Freud. Freud initially inspired Breton's and the Surrealists' fascination with the unconscious, but he collected consistently valuable objects; Breton instead collected things in flea markets that appealed to him in a psychological way, but

would have been considered junk. The most important public precedent to Breton's collection of non-Western objects would have been the now-defunct Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography in Paris, which similarly concentrated objects from around the world into cramped spaces. Prior to its demolition and the transfer of its collections to the Museum of Man in 1937 (and to the Quai Branly Museum in 2006),¹³ the Trocadéro had been a mecca for modernist artists and writers, including Pablo Picasso, who described it as a "frightful museum" in an interview with André Malraux in 1937, "disgusting," "with an awful smell." Nonetheless Picasso felt that "something . . . that was very important" had happened to him there; he described this "something" with words like "shock," "revelation," "charge," and "force."¹⁴ Picasso subsequently translated these effects artistically into *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), in which he combines recognizable human women, supposedly posed in a brothel, with women whose faces have been replaced by African-style masks. Breton was early to herald the revolutionary quality of Picasso's combinatory approach, when he wrote, in a letter of advice to the couturier Jacques Doucet prior to Doucet's acquisition of the painting, that it was "the primary event of the beginning of the twentieth-century . . . an intense projection of that modern ideal we have only begun to understand in a fragmentary way."¹⁵ Breton then transferred this admiration for Picasso's painting to his combinatory approach of putting objects together in his study from different parts of the world with an explicit desire to explore knowledge through objects typical of cabinets of curiosities, including masks infused with sentience, like Picasso's from *Les Femmes d'Alger*.¹⁶

Picasso then participated in the craze for non-Western art that swept Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, breaking down boundaries between science and art that Breton and the surrealist group would pursue through their embrace of Freudian psychoanalysis and ethnography. Picasso was one of several avant-garde artist-collectors like André Dérain, René Daumal, Apollinaire, and later Breton, to admire the Trocadéro museum, where "you could make sensational searches and discoveries."¹⁷ Created in 1877 "to celebrate the exploits of French explorers and, more generally, the French nation," the Trocadéro lacked the didactic purpose most museums have today.¹⁸ The collected objects were displayed as both booty and scientific evidence of other cultures.¹⁹

Its African room has been compared to a pirate's cave and a flea market: chaotic, filled with mannequins and makeshift cabinets poorly cobbled together from packing cases.²⁰ Nineteenth-century photographs show these cabinets dimly visible in the background behind a jumble of statues; they have miscellaneous bric-a-brac piled on top of them, with weapons arranged in fan formation on the wall above, under the Victorian picture rail.²¹ Despite the dusty mess, the room has design features



Fig. 3. Trocadero Museum of Ethnography, African Room, 1895. Musée du Quai Branly/Scala/Art Resource, NY

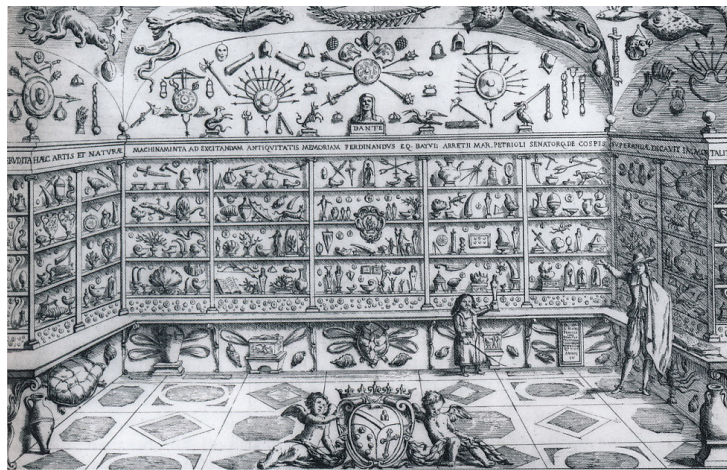


Fig. 4. Cabinet of Ferdinando Cospi, Bologna, (L. Legati, Museo Cospiano) 1677

reminiscent of earlier *Wunderkammern* such as Fernandino Cospi's from Bologna, which illustrations show had a similar fan formation of weapons on the wall.

The Trocadéro, like Breton's study and later, the Witnesses room at the Menil, shared commonalities with its baroque precedents; this partly explains how it became a "mecca" for Breton as a budding Surrealist. It also strove to show as much of "the whole world" as possible in one room.

Breton began his collection of non-Western objects with an Easter Island statuette he bought as a teenager with prize money he received for good grades; he later reproduced it in *Nadja*.²² His appreciation of non-Western art represents an early twentieth-century phase in the collection of such works, which, in France and the United States, did not wind up in major museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Menil Collection in Houston and the Fondation Dapper in Paris much before the 1980s, whereas the African and Oceanic rooms in the Louvre opened only in 2000 and the Quai Branly Museum in 2006. The Witnesses room opened in August 1999. It has a corner cabinet inscribed with the statement: "*The objects in this exhibition were either owned by the Surrealists or are in the spirit of those they collected.*"²³

The room occupies a dark corner of Renzo Piano's tranquil modernist building, created to house the Menil's surrealist-influenced modern collection, and



Fig. 5. Witnesses Room, Menil Collection, Corner Cabinet with the inscription: *The objects in this exhibition were either owned by the Surrealists or are in the spirit of those they collected.* The Menil Collection, Houston. Photographer: Kent Dorn

opened in 1987. To enter the Witnesses room, one has the impression of leaving behind the sleek elegance of the public galleries for a room in a private house, a gentleman's study from the turn-of-the-(last)-century, with the dark paint and low lighting replacing the padded feeling walls lined with books might have given the room.

The Witnesses room contains a preponderance of non-Western objects that reflect Carpenter's interests as an anthropologist who devoted much of his career to the cultures of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. As a recent recreation of a surrealist study, it also evokes the way surrealist collecting anticipated the aesthetics of globalization familiar to contemporary audiences in the twenty-first century. The impressive selection of non-Western objects reflects the room's name, Witnesses, chosen, I believe, in honor of Picasso, who called the African masks that hung in his studio "magical objects...intercessors," later specifying that for him they were "more witnesses than models."²⁴ This view of non-Western objects, particularly from the Pacific Islands and the Pacific Northwest Coast of the United States, concurs with the surrealist understanding that such objects had a certain ghostly sentience that was linked to what the surrealists viewed as their psychological function, reflecting Picasso's choice of the word *witnesses* to identify his African masks.

Picasso and other artists and writers who visited the Trocadéro recognized what they saw as the modernist aesthetics of African and Oceanic objects, and valued them in a way they had not been valued at the museum. They included similar objects in their personal collections and elevated them in their own minds from scientific specimens to art, thus showing such objects new respect, while simultaneously de-historicizing them in new, intellectually colonizing ways, as distinct from the overtly colonialist relation of the collector to his objects during the era of *Wunderkammern*.²⁵ Whether in Breton's study, at the Menil, the Louvre, or the Quai Branly Museum, these non-Western objects no longer fulfill the spiritual function for which many of them had initially been intended. An example may be found in the Aboriginal Churinga stones, partially buried in sand in the Witnesses room, and that according to Carpenter in the video-taped interview from November 2000, represented the inner beings of "spirit ancestors" which were meant to be hidden from sight and only "taken out by the right people at the right place and the right time and seen by no one else." Situated in a private collection visited by guests (Breton owned one that looked like the stones in the Witnesses room) or in a gallery space like the Witnesses room at the Menil,²⁶ the sacredness of such an object was lost, even as it became revered in new ways. Its function shifted from a double life switching back and forth between sacred resting and reverential viewing by the initiated, to a double life resting in full view of the uninitiated while containing,

repressed within it, the powerful yet mysterious vestiges of its former life as a container for ancient beings, ancient ghosts. The taboos that formerly protected such stones were broken, yet at the same time they were accorded a profound and newfound respect for their aesthetic value, which shifted from being an ancillary attribute of the stones to their distinguishing feature. This doubleness linked to the stones's previous and current functions—as religious and then aesthetic icons—was typical of Surrealism, and fundamental to what I call surrealist ghostliness.²⁷

Ghostliness characterizes the feeling the Surrealists first explored through automatic trance at the outset of the movement, when Breton first described Surrealism as “a certain psychic automatism that corresponds quite well to the dream state.”²⁸ These trances alerted them to other selves swirling within the self, buried in the unconscious mind, which automatism could help to reveal. Their Freudian embrace of human beings as imbued with active unconscious minds, as well as rational conscious minds, initially found its way into surrealist practice through puns, particularly those embedded in Robert Desnos's “Rose Sélavy” poems that helped to launch the movement. On one of the first nights of “automatic sleeps” conducted in Breton's apartment in the fall of 1922, Desnos was challenged by Francis Picabia to speak an Rose-Sélavy-type poem while in a hypnotic trance, referring to the one-line tongue-twisting poems Marcel Duchamp had been publishing in the proto-surrealist journal *Littérature*. Desnos complied and began to produce one-line tongue-twisting, punning poems in series, and later published 150 of them in *Corps et biens* (1930), using as a title Duchamp punning pseudonym—Rose Sélavy, which *sounds* like *éros, c'est la vie*, “eros, that's life.”

With Desnos's “Rose Sélavy” poems, the version on the page and in the ear is doubled by another, often more logical ghost. The nonsense poem *le temps est un aigle agile dans un temple* (Time is an agile eagle in a temple), for example, is doubled by a series of truisms all based on rational realities: time flies (like an eagle); an eagle is noble; nobility is admired as if it were (in) a temple; time governs us as assuredly as a noble eagle symbol in a temple; and, finally, surrealist time—dream time—is *agile* in the sense that it does not follow strict chronology. Surrealist time flies the way a bird does—with swoops and halts, soaring and gliding speedily in fits and starts; it does not follow the exact intervals typical of a Western clock. The reader-listener of this poem makes all of these associations unconsciously because of the resemblances between the way the words look and sound—the way they “make love” to produce meaning, as Breton wrote in an admiring essay.²⁹ A nonsense poem makes sense partly through the way the *puns* create ghostly doubles that interconnect all the words and meanings in a manner that emphasizes the ghostliness that typified those early surrealist experiments with automatic trances because of the mysterious, at

times oracular, pronouncements uttered by the participants while in a second state.³⁰ Desnos's punning poems, with double meanings, manifest and latent, set the stage paradigmatically for the ghostly objects that would become characteristic of the movement.

At the Menil, Carpenter emphasized visual more than textual puns. In the video-taped interview, he explains how the Surrealists were deeply interested in “those areas of the world where they could obtain visual puns”—like Alaska, Easter Island, and New Guinea, areas which they exaggerated intentionally in the distorted map they published in 1929.³¹ Many of the objects in the Witnesses room enact visual puns, whereby one thing is hidden within, and co-exists with, another as its ghost. This desire to represent two realities at once conforms to the idea inherent to the surrealist image, as Breton defined it in the “Manifesto,” as a “*juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.*”³² The Menil's Kwakiutl transformation mask from British Columbia, for example, enacts a double or punning reality: this mask representing a killer whale becomes human when activated by a string that makes the eyes and mouth open and the wooden fin drop out of sight.

One reality is then contained within, and co-exists, with another, in a reversible, non-hierarchical relation of one thing to another, the manifest and the latent, the thing and its ghost. “With a transformation mask you have a change



Fig. 6. Witnesses Room, Menil Collection, Mask of a Killer Whale with Dorsal Fin; The Menil Collection, Houston. Photographer: Kent Dorn

taking place before your eyes,” notes Carpenter in the video interview. “Everything is there together. It’s a pun in which all elements co-exist. It’s not something becoming another thing. It is being. It is both things together.”³³ Breton’s Kwakiutl mask—obtained from Julius Carlebach, the same dealer in New York from which the Menil’s mask came,—also transforms from one pose to another; instead of switching from human to animal, however, it switches from a human face awake to a human face asleep. Breton’s positioning of his mask in his study alongside two masks of himself and one of Paul Eluard in Gilles Ehrmann’s photographs shows his interest in seeing continuities between disparate cultures, and in how the juxtaposition of their works might tease out and clarify latent mysteries related to the human condition. This arrangement follows an order that constitutes his early twentieth-century version of the baroque collector’s desire to know the world, inside and outside, intimately and globally, from the perspective of a global citizen attuned aesthetically, rationally, and unconsciously—even experientially, as Foucault might say—to the world around him.

In the Menil’s Witnesses Room, Carpenter displays Western visual puns as well, including a reproduction of the photograph of an African village that Dalí tinkered with and published in 1931 with the title *Paranoid Face*, playing in a characteristically humorous way with the continuities between disparate cultures that interested Breton. Dalí touched up the photograph with white paint and rotated it so that it became transformed into a primitivist head of the type that might have been made by Picasso. The original village and villagers remain identifiable as ghostly



Fig. 7. Witnesses Room, Menil Collection, Vitrine. The duck-rabbit drawing by Joseph Jastrow, referred to by Wittgenstein and Carpenter, as well as a version of Dalí’s African village, are inside the vitrine, on the right. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photographer: Kent Dorn

figures, discernible only at a second glance in the manner of a visual pun, whereby one reality contains within it the possibility of another. The other prominently displayed Western visual pun is the famous duck-rabbit image to which Wittgenstein refers in the *Philosophical Investigations*,³⁴ which like Dalí's *Paranoid Face* operates on two levels simultaneously. Wittgenstein's "thesis is that you can only experience one at a time," explains Carpenter. "But supposing you experienced both of them as a single image. And I think this is what the native people did. They recognized rabbit-duck, not as alternatives but as a single form."

Indeed in the first "Manifesto" Breton expressed a desire not just to *juxtapose* opposing realities but to *reconcile* them, describing *Surreality* as "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory," an idea he repeats more emphatically in the "Second Manifesto," where he announces an ideal, the surrealist search for "a certain point in the mind"—later identified as a "sublime point"—"at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions."³⁵ These puns and doubles are connected to the co-presence of our manifest and latent understanding of things we see and know, including the graver question of the inevitability of our own mortality that subtends waking, everyday reality as a low hum, and motivates what I call ghostliness. With ghostliness what usually might be repressed is brought to light, so that it might coincide and co-exist with surface realities. It is this logic that also governs Breton's collecting aesthetic and his method of display.

The Surrealists sought to create feelings of wonder akin to the emotions *Wunderkammern* were meant to stir, partly through their activities in a group, wherein the whole is mysteriously greater than the sum of its parts. Belonging to the collective was paramount for them because they debunked the nineteenth-century ideal of the genius hero-artist on political grounds. This led to the practice of collective work, beginning with the first volume of automatic writing co-authored by Breton and Philippe Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields* (1920), and continuing with the exquisite corpse games in the 1920s and 1930s, which yielded monstrous bodies doubled by the logical ghosts of actual, recognizable bodies.³⁶ Collective work also brought them closer to what they understood to be the creative modes of production for the artists who made the non-Western objects they collected, which were similarly imbued with ghostliness in the form of the repressed spiritual power that the Surrealists understood as psychology, yet having the same ghostly effects. As the Surrealists acquired knowledge about their collections,³⁷ they sought to emulate the objects they admired through the creation of objects of their own, which they similarly invested with quasi-sentient, ghostly qualities. They hoped

their psychologically invested objects could help them interpret the world around them better, in an impulse similar to the ordering desires of their collecting baroque forebears, leading to the revelation of psychological latencies within the self that might be drawn out and made visible, in synchronic sympathy with the external world embodied in the things that surrounded them.³⁸

In Breton's study and at the Menil, the visitor is surrounded by objects and thus invited to *experience* the ghostliness that fascinated the Surrealists about the objects they loved. The visitor at the Menil is able to walk around many of the objects in the Witnesses room, as though in a private space like Breton's apartment, and unlike *Breton's Wall* at the Pompidou Center—made of what was left of Breton's collection after the auction of 2003—which must be viewed through a vitrine. The experience of seeing things up close and being able to walk around them at the Menil, as if in a private home, serves as a reminder that we are all collectors who seek to order our understanding of our place in the world through our contact with natural and material things that surround us. It is this sense of recognition that activates all the objects so effectively for the viewer and makes their ghostliness palpable. Found objects akin to the valuable “curiosities” typical of *Wunderkammern* and of the less monetarily valuable curiosities in Breton's study—including stones from river beds that nonetheless had a strong psychological charge for him—also



Fig. 8. Witnesses Room, Menil Collection, Antique Cabinet from Dominique de Menil's Bedroom. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photographer: Kent Dorn

find a place in the Witnesses room at the Menil, in the antique cabinet that used to stand in Dominique de Menil's bedroom.

This delicate piece of furniture honors an early name for the room, what Dominique de Menil's son-in-law Ted Carpenter called in a letter "the proposed Surrealists' Closet."³⁹ In itself a microcosmic *Wunderkammer* of which this room is a larger example, this cabinet is filled with small things in an intimate arrangement. Dominique de Menil took children to see it, as Carpenter explains in the video-taped interview, delighting them for hours partly because so many of the objects were small, like toys, including a multi-faceted ball that resembles in its hermetic function the obsolete measuring tool Breton had found in Paris and reproduced in *Najda*. Such objects, through their mysterious and now forgotten initial function, carry within them the repressed former life typical of objects beloved of the Surrealists, objects with manifest and latent energies, typical of ghostliness.

The answer to what makes a collection surrealist, then, lies in the order Breton gave to his study: his selection of objects from a great variety of sources that reflected his ambition to know the world in a material and a psychological way. He and his fellow Surrealists embraced an aesthetic that, as the Menil's recreation of a surrealist study confirms, we now call globalization. They also respected the ghostly energy generated by combining such things together, further linking the collector and his things through a heightened sense of human mortality. Breton frequently chose objects that had ghostly power because of a double valence—public and secret, with manifest and latent lives, resulting from the difference between the object's initial use function and its subsequent aesthetic function—what in "Crisis of the Object" he calls two (different) images connected to one thing.⁴⁰ This turning away of an object from its original function transformed that repressed function into a forceful latency within the newly purposed object. This psychological process transformed everyday Western things into corollaries for the non-Western objects created for ritual functions, and invested with spiritual powers that the Surrealists repurposed as art in their collections.

The parallel between these two kinds of objects, Western and non-Western, became evident in the May 1936 "Surrealist Exhibition of Objects" at the Charles Ratton gallery in Paris, for which Breton wrote "Crisis of the Object." In the exhibition Duchamp's readymade *Bottlerack* (1914) was displayed in close proximity to Oceanic masks belonging to Breton and Eluard. This juxtaposition of Duchamp's *Bottlerack*, purchased in the hardware section of a department store as an industrial device for drying bottles in cafés and repurposed as a work of art, looked decorative in its environment in a gallery surrounded by masks, its concentric spokes resembling a headdress that could suddenly be imagined as an adornment to be worn during a

sacred dance.⁴¹ This public juxtaposition of things embodied the idea of co-existing realities embedded in the definition of the surrealist image; it mirrored the personal juxtaposition of things in Breton's study, which he arranged and rearranged on a regular basis in a kind of material automatic writing.⁴² The logic of display by juxtaposition also confirmed Breton's desire to pursue insights made possible by establishing continuities between disparate cultures—including the shared human experience of mortality—a pursuit that also fascinated Carpenter.⁴³ The effect of the Surrealists' reintroduction into the twentieth-century of the ordering principles typical of the baroque *Wunderkammer* was to link modernist humanism firmly to the world and to science—psychology and ethnography, in particular—in a way that enhanced human knowledge of the self in the world. This surrealist ambition, at once vast and intimate, was in line with their baroque forbears and furthermore set the stage for twenty-first century efforts to manage globalization on a human scale. The latter involves not only the arts but political and social attempts to mitigate, through awareness of the individual who produces the objects and food stuffs on sale, the power of global industries in the international market.

The question that follows should be how to consider the legacy of such a collection—whether at the Menil or elsewhere. How are we to think about these modern-day *Wunderkammern* now, in the twenty-first century? How do these twentieth-century baroque spaces, with their material traces of disparate cultures that still spark emotional responses in contained spaces, continue to function in the present day? Is their purpose purely historic? Perhaps the ways the Surrealists themselves shifted their views over the course of the twentieth century might serve as a guide. Over the years, the Surrealists slowly gained knowledge about the non-Western objects they collected through their study of ethnography and French sociology—Breton, Tristan Tzara, and Wolfgang Paalen, for example, all published essays about works in their collections. Nevertheless, they tended to be blind to the way their mode of display, because of their channeling of their appreciation for their objects through a First World understanding of them as *art*, established a new, intellectually colonizing distance between themselves and the men and women who had made the things they collected.⁴⁴ Like their baroque forebears, they understood the objects they collected as keys to knowledge. As their understanding of the forces of colonialist domination that made the objects accessible to them in the first place grew, they also felt increasingly uncomfortable.⁴⁵

Michel Leiris, who participated in the surrealist movement in the 1920s and later in Georges Bataille's College of Sociology in the late 1930s, for example, became an ethnographer and joined the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography's Dakar-Djibouti Mission,⁴⁶ which brought back large quantities of objects from

Central Africa. At the Mission's outset in 1931, Leiris was already describing his discomfort with the methods they were using to acquire objects, writing in a letter that "nine times out of ten, the methods we use to gather the objects are coercive, tantamount to commandeering...I have the sense that we're caught in a vicious circle: under the pretext of getting people to understand and like African Blacks we steal from them and we create new ethnographers who in turn will 'like' and 'steal from' them."⁴⁷ By 1950 Leiris addressed his discomfort on the Mission by actively advising young French ethnographers in a graduation speech to pay attention to what he then called "the colonial problem," asking them to strive to understand the colonized populations they had chosen to study, and to advocate for them self-consciously, in relation to their own, colonizing nation.⁴⁸ In this same postwar period, Breton actively advocated for decolonization and independence for what would soon be former French colonies.⁴⁹

Now, almost a hundred years after Breton bought his first non-Western object, the question arises of how museums that have absorbed works from his collection—like the Menil and the Quai Branly Museum—can acknowledge the violence of the colonialism that yielded such riches. Indeed, a fundamental difference between Breton's modern baroque collection and that of his seventeenth-century forebears has to do with the fact that in that initial Age of Discovery, colonialism was not widely recognized as problematic. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, Breton was actively aware that colonialism was no longer a viable way for people from different cultures to interact. The Surrealists supported social justice in their own time, including, for example, their support of Moroccan rebels fighting French authorities in the Rif Valley in the 1920s, and their protest against the French government's International Colonial Exhibition in 1931, just as Dominique and Jean de Menil were dedicated to civil rights, and investigated with their collection "the potential to effect social change through the study, placement, and presentation of art."⁵⁰

In 2001 Anthony Shelton called for contemporary museums to consider "the political complexities and ethical compromises" unleashed by globalization in a sincere effort to understand "and answer audiences that are increasingly made up of peoples they once considered as part of their object."⁵¹ A conscious effort in this direction is still lacking in French national museums, as Nélia Dias has mused with reference to the Quai Branly museum, which does not deal "directly" with "people from former French colonies."⁵² The Menil is more self-conscious in its displays. To meld current audiences with past, Eurocentric ones would require a consistently didactic approach to display that would allow for the immersive, Foucauldian *experience* of a surrealist collection while at the same time making clear the social

costs involved in its creation.⁵³ This begs the question of what is to be done when the desire to present alternate worldviews, aesthetics, and spiritualities runs afoul of the sensibilities of those who created these objects, and whose descendants also visit museums like the Menil—where, for example, they might see the Australian Churinga stones partially buried in sand and partially visible, despite the solemn injunction Carpenter recounts in the video interview that these stones should be seen only by those who have been initiated into their sacred mysteries?⁵⁴

The Surrealists redirected the notion of “discovery” from the baroque Age of Discovery inward, making of their psychic worlds unknown territories to explore. A new repurposing of the idea of “discovery”—in an historic sense of understanding the role the surrealists themselves played in contributing to our twenty-first-century globally-inflected aesthetic—might help to illuminate some of our own contradictory beliefs in light of a new understanding of theirs.⁵⁵ A shift in display practices would allow contemporary audiences to understand better the Surrealists’ curiosity about the psychological powers they attributed to objects and their histories, including the problematic aspects of these histories that the Surrealists overlooked. Like their baroque forebears, the surrealists ordered their objects with great care, just as Carpenter did at the Menil. Objects the Surrealists once treasured, now in museums like the Menil and the Quai Branly, could be used to tell the story of their journey through surrealist collections to their current location, situating them historically and psychologically as they circulate through different contexts in a world that is increasingly sophisticated in its understanding of itself. The ordering system of the Surrealists took into account history, ethnography, and politics as well as psychology. They intended for their ordering structures to tease out how the knowledge they acquired from their objects might make them wiser citizens of the world. If objects once owned by them could be made to tell their own stories, such stories could enhance our understanding of them and of the surrealist movement. Such stories would be part of the continuum of effort, dating back to the earliest museums in the shape of cabinets of curiosities, to understand human beings in as global a context as possible, and that is once again a contemporary preoccupation and goal.

1 Versions of this essay were delivered as talks at CAA (“Witnesses Awakened: The Recreation of a Surrealist Collection at the Menil,” 2010), the *Journal of Surrealism*

and the Americas conference in Houston (“Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision: A Houston Cabinet of Curiosities at the Menil,” 2010), and the Georgetown University “Surrealist Collections” conference (“What Makes a Collection Surrealist?” 2011). I thank Stephanie d’Alessandro, Claudia Mesch, Amy Winter, and Pierre Taminiaux for their organization of these sessions and conferences.

2 The best color images of Breton’s study are by Gilles Ehrmann in the Adam Biro volume, now out of print, *42, rue Fontaine, l’atelier d’André Breton* (Paris, 2003), with a text by Julien Gracq. I thank Aube Elléouët for making it possible for me to meet Elisa Breton at the rue Fontaine in the summer of 1992, in the final months of her residence there. I also thank the Roy family in Tours, for hosting me that summer and introducing me to Aube.

3 From a letter from Edmund Carpenter to the curator Paul Winkler from April 22nd, 1999. My thanks to Kristina Van Dyke and Geri Aramanda for making it possible for me to work in the archives at the Menil.

4 Silvia Spitta, *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 36.

5 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 82. Hooper-Greenhill credits Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor’s *The Origins of Museums* (Oxford University Press, 1985) with establishing a new understanding of the history of museums upon which she builds. See also Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002). There is a wonderful recreation of a seventeenth-century “Chamber of Wonders” in Baltimore, at the Walters Art Museum.

6 Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 23.

7 Abigail Susik, “Recollecting Curiosity,” paper delivered at the CAA conference in Chicago, February, 2010.

8 Joy Kenseth, *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, NH: The Hood Museum, 1992), 86.

9 Michel Foucault, “A Swimmer Between Two Words,” trans. Robert Hurley, *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 173; André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 24. Foucault amplifies this idea further in “A Swimmer Between Two Words”: “We are now in a time when experience—and the thought that is inseparable from it—are developing with an extraordinary richness, in both a unity and a dispersion that wipe out the boundaries of provinces that were once well established” (174).

10 Breton, *Nadja* 19.

11 The marvelous in French baroque-era literature was manifested partly by the incursion of the voices of gods into otherwise secular plots in plays, even occasionally in the classical plays of Jean Racine. Other Surrealists also identify the marvelous as essential to Surrealism, including Louis Aragon, in “Challenge to Painting” (1930), and Ernst in “Beyond Painting,” (1936); see Lucy Lippard, *Surrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974). Desnos’ work is broadly marked by the surrealist marvelous; see my *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

12 Kenseth 81.

13 The Quai Branly Museum collection catalogue provides the following list of “French institutions that housed the collections of the musée du quai Branly” (in French, my translation): the National Library, the Museum of Natural History, the Louvre Museum, the Army Museum, the Museum of National Antiquities, the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography, the Museum of Man, the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania, and, the Quai Branly Museum’s own acquisitions. See Yves Le Fur, editor, *Musée du Quai Branly, The Collection* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 456.

14 William Rubin, “Picasso,” *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art*, Vol. 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 255.

15 This letter from December 12, 1924, was reproduced in the two-volume catalogue published by the Picasso Museum in Paris, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1988), 590, my translation.

16 A wall label for the “Erotic Object: Surrealist Sculpture from the Collections” show, curated by Anne Umland at the Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 2009, that referred to the power of found materials within surrealist objects “as a combinatorial practice, a revolution in art making,” points to this kind of approach, which, I believe, was partly inspired by the influence on these European artists of the non-Western objects they were collecting.

17 Julia Kelly, *Art, Ethnography, and the Life of Objects* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 16.

18 Sally Price, *Paris Primitive* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 81. The Trocadéro’s African room was not dedicated to the instruction of the public as it would be today, Jean-Louis Paudrat explains. It was not “methodically classified, well-maintained, and accurately labeled . . . [and] exhibited under good conditions.” Jean-Louis Paudrat, “From Africa,” *“Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century Art*, Vol.1, 142.

19 Thomas McEvilley, *Art & Otherness* (Kingston: McPherson & Co. 1992), 87.

20 See Kelly, Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 98, and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Harvard:

Harvard University Press, 1988). The Trocadéro's "temporary" glassed-in cupboards," as Paudrat describes them, "tottered not only under the weight of the objects they contained, which were heaped together in such a way that one could hardly tell one from another, but even under that of various domestic tools jutting out from above them." Paudrat, 125–175, 142.

21 See Paudrat, 126, and Rubin, 322. Paudrat's article also has illustrations of Apollinaire's apartment.

22 Breton, *Nadja*, 33. See Pierre Amrouche in Jean-Michel Gouthier, ed., *André Breton, 42, rue Fontaine, Arts primitifs* (Paris: Calmels Cohen, 2003), 274.

23 There is an effigy in the room, a tiki figure from the Marquesas Islands once owned by Breton, that was acquired by the Menils in 1963. The Sulka figure from Breton's collection that he reproduced in *Nadja* was included in the 1991 Paris exhibition of Breton's collection at the Pompidou Center as a loan from the Menil. Breton, *Nadja* 131; *André Breton: La beauté convulsive* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1991), 146.

24 Rubin, 260. He made the first statement in an interview with Florent Fels in 1923 and the second in an interview with André Malraux in 1937. See Rubin, 260, notes 64 and 65 on page 336, for the reference to Fels; Rubin, 255, for the references to the interview with Malraux (see note 8).

25 My thanks to Marian Eide, Katherine Hart, Juliette Bianco, and Brian Kennedy for their discussions of this question with me.

26 See Gouthier, *André Breton, 42, rue Fontaine, Arts primitifs*, 63.

27 See my forthcoming book, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Nebraska, 2013).

28 André Breton, *The Lost Steps*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 90.

29 Breton, *Lost Steps*, 102; translation modified.

30 See my "Rose Sélavy's Ghosts: Life, Death, and Desnos," *French Review* 83.4 (2010): 4-15.

31 See Elza Adamowicz on the way this map deconstructs "the ideology of imperialist maps" by challenging "established views of centre and margins," in "Off the Map: Surrealism's Uncharted Territories," *Surrealism: Crossings/Frontiers*, ed. Elza Adamowicz (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 197.

32 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan-Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1969), 20.

33 This video, taped on November 16th 2000, is stored in the Menil archives.

34 The drawing actually comes from Joseph Jastrow in 1899.

35 Breton, *Manifestoes*, 14, 123; André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 114.

36 André Breton and Philippe Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields*, trans. David Gascogyne (London: Atlas Press, 1985). Examples of exquisite corpse drawings may be found in Dawn Ades, *Surrealist Art: The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1997).

37 Breton wrote an essay in 1950 (in *Neuf*, reproduced in Gouthier, 278) about a Haida transformation mask he had purchased in New York in the 1940s. Tristan Tzara wrote essays on African art, and Wolfgang Paalen, in his the journal *Dyn*, published articles about Pacific Northwest Coast culture. For more on Paalen see Amy Winter, *Wolfgang Paalen: Artist and Theorist of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Praeger, 2002). For more on Tzara's application of surrealist theory to his African Art collection see Adam Jolles, "The Tactile Turn: Envisioning a Post-Colonial Aesthetic in France," *Yale French Studies* 109 (2006): 17-28.

38 Germain Viatte invests the objects at the Quai Branly Museum with sentient powers that are closer to the surrealist, psychological understanding of the object's power than to the older anthropological understanding of such objects as invested with predominantly with religious forces when he writes: "Artefacts are becoming more than ever observers who accompany us on our way, and who question us as we go." Germain Viatte, "Foreword," *Masterpieces from the Musée du Quai Branly Collections* (Paris: Quai Branly Museum, 2008), 11.

39 This is from a letter from Carpenter to Dominique de Menil dated September 2, 1997, in which he pays tribute to the Surrealists' love of secret places and things, "sacred medicine bundles designed never to be opened; art made to be buried with the dead; effigies so powerful they were permanently sealed in basketry containers" (Menil archives).

40 See Breton's "Crisis of the Object" in its original form in *Cahiers d'Art*. In the essay Breton describes the juxtaposition of the two different "images" associated with an object as yielding imaginative *champs de forces* capable of triggering transformative "latencies." André Breton, "Crise de l'objet," *Cahiers d'Art* 11.6-10 (1936): 22 and 24.

41 For more on the selection of non-Western objects from Breton's and Eluard's personal collections for this exhibition, see Elizabeth Cowling, "The Eskimos, the American Indians, and the Surrealists," *Art History* 1.4 (December 1978): 484-500.

42 See Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, "Le tour des objets," *André Breton: La beauté convulsive*, 64-68.

43 Carpenter completed Carl Schuster's masterwork in long (12 volume) and short versions, *Patterns that Connect: Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1996). This book traces continuities between cultures through common images and myths, which Carpenter also explored in *Eskimo Realities* (1973)

and *Upside Down: Arctic Realities* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 2011). My thanks to Paul Winkler for our conversation at the Menil in October 2008.

44 See note 37. See also Efythymia Rentzou's "Minotaure, On Ethnography and Animals," *Symposium* (forthcoming).

45 Phyllis Taoua also calls it a "paradoxical logic" in "Of Natives and Rebels: Locating the Surrealist Revolution in French Culture," *South Central Review* 20.2-4 (Summer-Winter, 2003): 69. This contradictory behavior has also been analyzed by Leclercq and Janine Mileaf.

46 See Meryl Altman's "Was Surrealism a Humanism? The Case of Michel Leiris," in *Symposium* (forthcoming).

47 The letter is cited in footnote 204 to *L'Afrique fantôme*, in Michel Leiris, *Miroir de l'Afrique* (Paris: Gallimard-Quarto), 266-68; my translation.

48 Michel Leiris, "L'ethnographie devant le colonialisme," *Cinq études d'ethnologie* (Paris: Tel-Gallimard, 1988), 85, 88. This talk was first published in *Les Temps Modernes* 6.58 (August 1950): 357-74.

49 See Taoua. See also Jonathan Eburne's revised version of his article on "Antihumanism and Terror," that serves as the conclusion to his book, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (Cornell, 2008). Eburne writes: "Thus, although it recalled the anticolonialism of the 1920s in its political imperative, by the mid-1950s surrealism's project was not defined in the same terms as its prewar incarnations; rather than seeking to incite revolutionary thought or action through their works, the surrealists instead committed themselves to defending and extending such thought and action as it happened... The immediate task of surrealism was to defend these uprisings against the external and internal forces that threatened their liberatory potential: against the military powers that strove to crush them, but also against the tendency toward dogmatism that could pervert revolutionary violence into terror" (271). He concludes: "The surrealist experiment, then, might be understood as the attempt to mobilize art to 'suppress the exploitation of man by man' by causing an insurrection within thought" by "preparing the mind to defend itself against the forms of ideological closure that ensure the continuation of . . . atrocities" (276).

50 In addition to supporting the Civil Rights Movement, the Menils supported the desegregation of schools in Houston and implemented programs to make works from their African art collection accessible to Houston's African American community. Kristina Van Dyke, *African Art at the Menil* (Houston and New Haven: The Menil Collection and Yale University Press, 2008), 30-33. For more on the Surrealists' exhibition mounted in protest of the Colonialist Exhibition, see Janine Mileaf, "Body to Politics: Surrealist Exhibition of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton," *Res* 40 (Autumn 2001):

239-55, and Sophie Leclercq's *La rançon du colonialisme* (presses du reel, 2010).

51 Anthony Alan Shelton, "Museums in an Age of Cultural Hybridity," *Folk* 43 (2001): 222.

52 Nélia Dias, "Cultural Difference and Cultural Diversity: The Case of the Musée du Quai Branly," *Museums and Difference*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2008), 150.

53 See Maryse Fauvel's forthcoming book on national museums in France in light of colonialism and immigration.

54 I have argued for thinking about practices of display for works that once were in their collections in light of reconciliation theory, which would take into account audiences from the cultures from which many of these things originated. Reconciliation, a move towards atonement—literally at-one-ment (*OED*)—through display practices, would bring together the former colonized and the former colonizers into one audience and might usefully juxtapose, in the viewer's mind, surrealist aesthetics with their anti-colonialist and non-hierarchical ideologies according to the kind of combinatory style Breton applied to his collection. See my "Is Reconciliation Possible? Non-Western Objects at the Menil Collection and the Quai Branly Museum," *South Central Review* 27.3 (Fall 2010): 34-53.

55 An excellent example of how to use objects to explain their own presence in a display may be found in Pamela McClusky's *Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). The National Gallery of Australia is another museum that takes into account the sensibilities of the members of the communities they serve in planning their exhibitions.