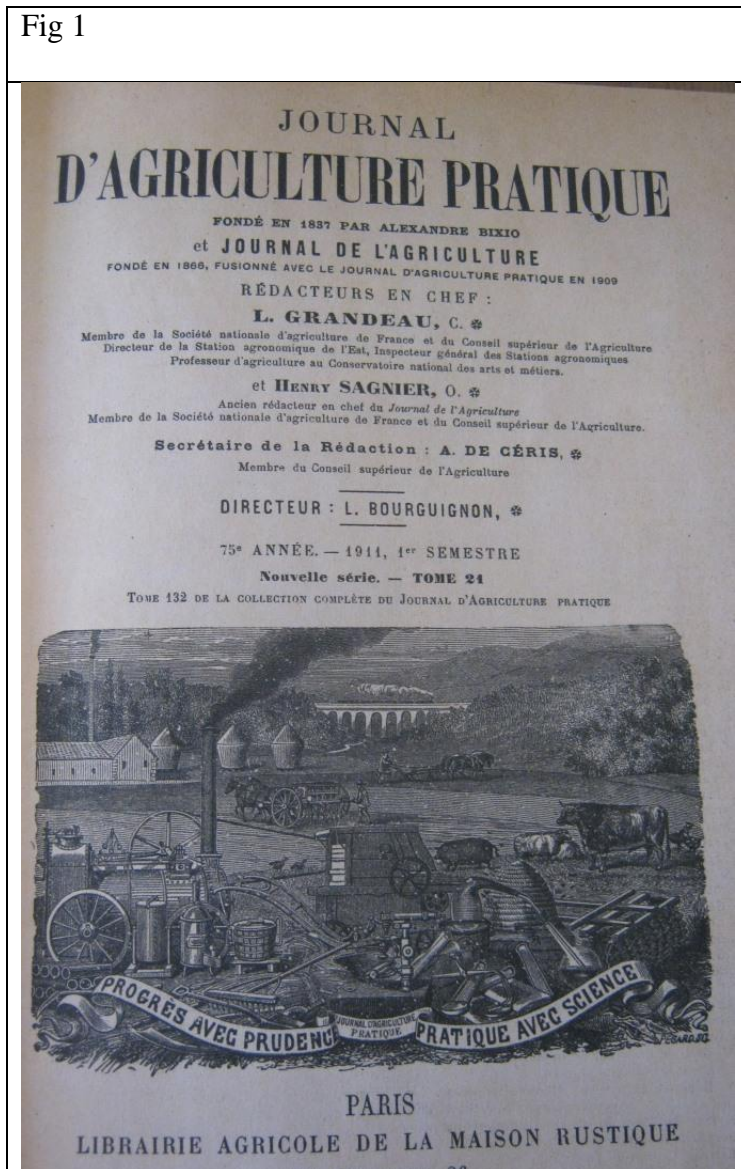


## Joseph Cornell's Untitled Book-Object: testing the boundaries of heterotopia.

‘Artists ..... gather the scattered pieces of the world as would a child or a rag-and-bone man ..... They bring together things outside of normal classifications, and glean from these affinities a new kind of knowledge which opens our eyes to certain unperceived aspects of our world and to the unconscious of our vision’ ( Didi-Huberman, 2010)<sup>1</sup>

The book is a French agricultural manual from 1911 of over 844 pages (see fig 1). It is full of detailed information and statistics about animals, crops, equipment, vehicles and machinery. To Joseph Cornell, an avid collector and collage-maker, the book offers many curious texts and delightful illustrations both rural and industrial. Cornell takes his scissors, pencil and paste and makes the manual another space: a book-object. The physical space of the book is transformed as Cornell cuts, draws, scribbles, and inserts an array of texts and images from fashion magazines, popular Victorian illustrations, paintings by Velázquez, Goya, Corot, Vermeer and Manet, avant-garde art and poems and much else. We find cut-outs, origami, flip pages and recurring images of balloons, hoops, stars, windows, arches, costumes, hats ..... It has no title; it is unfinished<sup>2</sup>.

Fig 1



## **The Weight of Explanation**

Most agree that the book-object is a marvellous exercise of the imagination. As with any work of art there is the temptation to interpret the piece through recounting influences and intentions. With Joseph Cornell's work overall, two strongly related explanatory paths emerge. Firstly, 'childhood was for Cornell the subject and the source that generated all other subjects' (Blair, 1998: 98) or the artist is 'redirecting the conformist adult back to a childhood state' (Leppanen-Guerra, 2012: 49). Or, secondly, Cornell's belief and practice in Christian Science was 'the single most important force not only in his life but in his work' (Starr, 1982: 1) and all of his work leads to 'eternity and a vision of the absolute'. In relation to the book-object, both these elucidations are relevant. The work is also often viewed as a homage to visionary artists, writers and composers, a 'tribute' to creative or innovative heroes (Roscoe Hartigan, 2007: 53) and, more specifically, a dialogue with Duchamp and the surrealists (see Ades, 2012). Whilst not negating any of these interpretations, this short essay tries to concentrate more on how the book-object works: the book-object's practice.

## **The Heterotopian Test<sup>3</sup>**

In Foucault's (1970[1966]) now rather famous preface to his book 'The Order of Things', he reflects on Jorge Luis Borges' bewildering account of an imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia and its classification of animals. Borges (1972 [1952]), an Argentinean philosopher and writer, published a selection of essays about world literature, maths, metaphysics, religion and language. One essay concerns the 'analytical language of John Wilkins' that reminds Borges of a Doctor Franz Kuhn who discovered a Chinese Encyclopaedia entitled 'Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge'. Foucault was baffled and delighted by it and quotes a certain classification of animals:

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied (j) innumerable. (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies (Foucault, 1970 [1966]: xv).

The passage made Foucault explode with laughter as it seemed 'to break all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought' and all the customary ways of dividing up the world in order to understand it. Borges conjures a marvellously different space that exposes and explodes all the usual, familiar orders that we use to relate and categorise things, words and images. More than unusual, ambiguous juxtapositions, even more than the surrealist amalgam of the sewing machine and umbrella on an operating table, Borges invents an impossible world where there is no common ground at all, no space or site to hold them. The depiction for Foucault shatters all the familiar categories of knowledge through which we 'tame' the world. It is disturbing, threatening, almost monstrous, glimpsing a completely different 'system of thought'. For Foucault, the space is even beyond the product of our imagination; it 'transgresses the boundaries of all imagination', an 'atlas of the impossible'. What is most extraordinary for Foucault is that this unreal space is the antithesis of conceptions of utopias with their smooth, ordered perfection - cutting through and against the grain of such myths - and yet, paradoxically, Borges identifies this complete distortion of familiar classification with China, traditionally associated with scrupulous order, a ceremonial and mythical place. This 'heterotopia', as Foucault calls it, is placed in the midst of a utopia full of 'complex

figures, with tangled paths, strange places, secret passages and unexpected communications'. The formal classification a) b) c) etc. and its origins in China heighten the disorienting effect:

‘it is a worse kind of order than that of the incongruous ....the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry (Foucault, 1970 [1966]: xv).

Heterotopias disorder our order and open up the possibilities of other orders. As Lindsay Blair suggests, Cornell's behaviour has some resemblance to aphasiacs who are also mentioned in Foucault's reflections on Borges' heterotopia. Cornell apparently was always collecting, sifting and re-arranging texts, images and objects. He ordered and catalogued a huge array of source material in dossiers throughout his life. In a diary he writes

‘the prospect of cluttered cellar -/ creative filing / creative arranging/ as poetics /as technique / as joyous creation cited (cited in Blair, 1998: 24)

Cornell is known for his ‘bewildering eclecticism and rampant associationism’ (26) but how far does this practice go? Does his childhood world of fantasy, a dialogue with Duchamp, an experiment with surrealism and an attempt to capture the eternal and absolute as envisaged in Christian Science add up to anything other? Do these forces move with or against each other? Put another way: Is the result more than, or other than, the sum of his assumed intention and influences?

### **The book-object**

The worn, black, re-bound manual gives no clue to what is now inside. We imagine turning the first leaf, the spine cracked, flimsy yellowing edges to each page<sup>4</sup>. Cornell has scribbled his signature and perhaps apposite address on the inside cover: ‘3708 Utopia Parkway’. We meet striking introductory images: the addition of an engraving of a Parisian street musician, regaled with an assortment of instruments is pointing directly at us, with his two docile hideously dressed monkeys, with feather hats, quietly reposed and patiently waiting to perform. Is the musician, with his performing monkeys, our conductor on this journey? In the corner of the same page, another engraving depicts a cat painting at an easel<sup>5</sup>, composing its own fanciful entertainment. The original title-page appears as the *Journal D'Agriculture Pratique et Journal De L'agriculture*, but this page is shared by the addition of two beautiful women waiting and seductively inviting us to go on and delve further. As reposed as the monkeys, but dressed this time in luxurious garments, the one on the left covering the whole of the page is a fashion model cut-out from a *Vogue* magazine. According to the magazine, she is covered with ‘sixteen black tulle ruffles all stiffened with horse-hair’. Following the women's invitation, we are disconcerted again, for rather than entering the pages of the journal we find instead a dedication page from a book by Camille Flammarion celebrating the ‘immortal geniuses’ - *Copernic, Glailée, Képler, Newton* – of astronomy. Another addition, a more humbly dressed woman carrying a basket, peers directly at us. A fold-out of constellations takes us in baffling directions. Hold on to one – science, the stars, art, progress, fashion, children's illustrations – and you are thrown against or through another. And when we finally reach the opening page of the agricultural year book the banner ‘Progress with Prudence’ and ‘Practice with Science’ is encapsulated by the journal's composite engraving, a striking conglomeration of rural and industrial images: cows, pigs, sheep and horse-drawn vehicles crowded out by the display of the latest farming machinery and equipment. (see fig 1). The journal itself has its playful distractions.

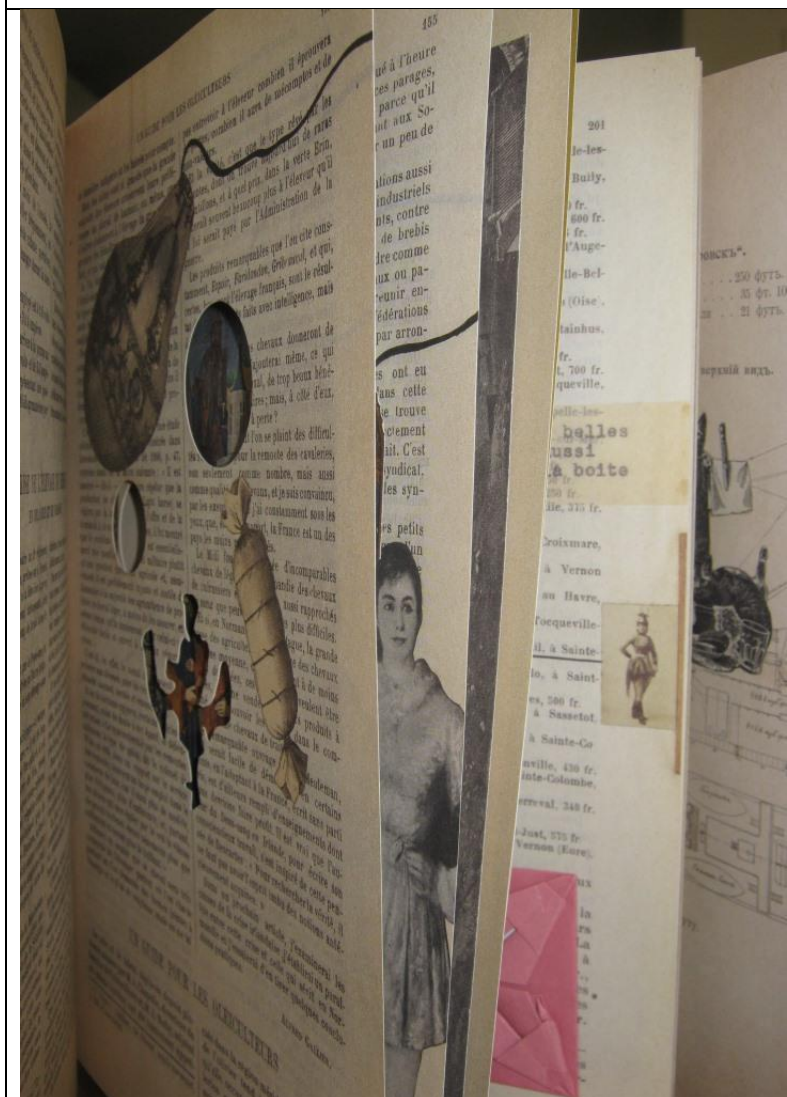
But the journey of this art object is just beginning, as from distant constellations to the immediacy of modern industry we move on to sea passages and the insertion of the spatial complexities of Stieglitz's famous modernist photograph 'The Steerage' (1911), depicting men, women and children on the lower-class deck of a steamer travelling from New York to Germany, an assemblage of people, ladders and gang-ways crossing the sea. And just a few pages later from that ship, always moving, we discover a carnival procession and a peacock – float with a fantastic plume of feathers pulled by horses, cheered on by the crowd and conducted by festive jesters. On a nearby page Cornell has circled the words '*foire*' and '*perpétuel*'. We seem to be in the midst of the perpetual movement of a fairground. A previous allusion to Magritte's play with words and images in the drawing of a piece of rock stuck across the page and arrowed as *pain* (bread) alerts us to the tricks of surrealism but is this the same game? The manual's technical text, along with charts and rows of statistics, are underlined, circled, cut out, juxtaposing with, or peeping through, images that offer endless permutations and associations. The formal and playful are not so much juxtaposed one against the other; they release a different space altogether which never settles.

Fig 2





Fig 3 from facsimile (Leppanen-Guerra, and Tasjian (2012).

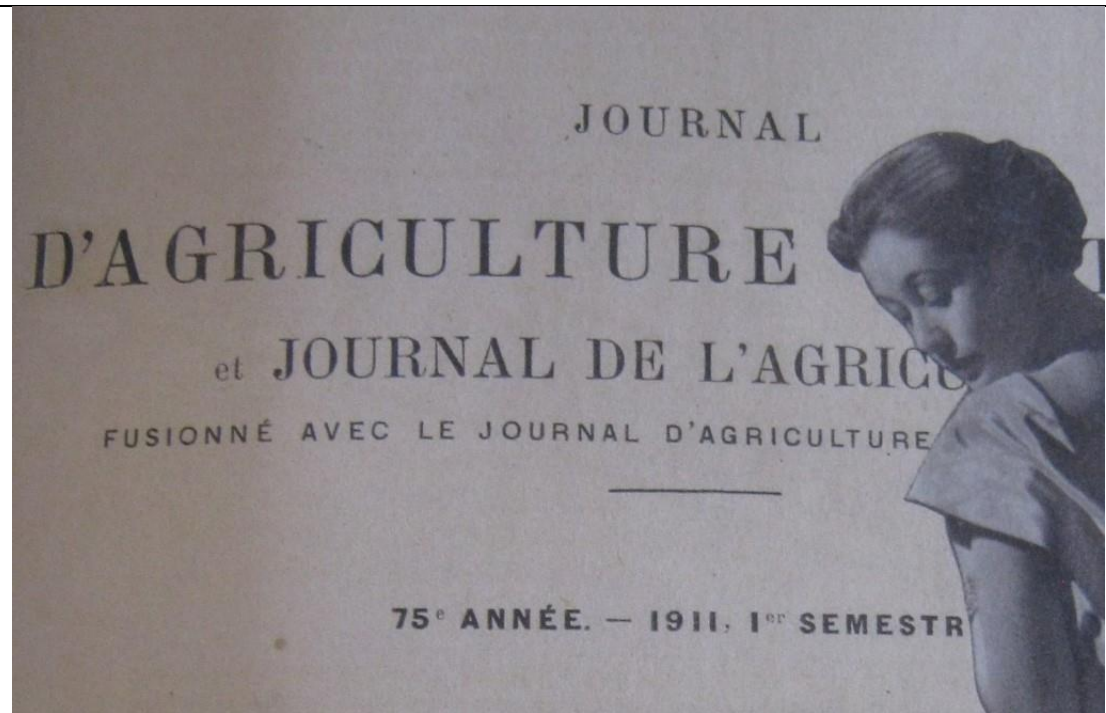


We are encouraged to experience the book-object in different ways as text and image work to create another type of language. Dream-like comes to mind but does not quite capture the tangible immediacy of this on-going, unfinished exercise-experiment of the imagination. It plays with and beyond surrealism. Across a list of bulls' names with their associated statistics, he scribbles 'make these bull names into poems more beautiful than beautiful girls'. He circles one called 'Troubadour' and alters another to read 'Cocteau'. We can trace references to writers and artists throughout but the game is not intellectual; we are actively encouraged to participate, to look through arches, windows, openings, doorways and cut-outs that litter the whole book's imagery. Altering the book format even more, he includes a piece of origami which opens on to an image of a prize bull. Origami windows appear elsewhere and corners of pages are transformed into a flip-book of a woman's moving head. The play is with both space and time. The overlay of cuttings from Velázquez's *Las Meninas* works differently (fig 2). The famous painting<sup>6</sup>, set in the painter's studio in Philip IV's palace in Madrid is here reduced to a cut-out of the painter peering at us rather comically from behind his canvass and the Infanta, the original formal focus of this painting, swings doll-like from a chandelier. It as if the painting has been infected by the disruptive play of heterotopia. The formality of the original setting of Velázquez's studio, the painting's complex play of space

and light, the ultimate ‘representation of classical representation’ (Foucault, 1970 [1966]: 16) is shattered and we are left with associations that criss-cross the whole book-object. From the earlier satirical cat at its easel to the later insert of Corot painting in the countryside, the artist is at work. Does the elaborate gown of the Infanta on her chandelier compete with the beautiful garments of fashion models and the frilly dresses of performing monkeys? Indeed, clothes (humble, rural, courtly, extravagant and fashionable) and wonderful costumes (harlequins, jesters, troubadours, bull fighters, Spanish gypsy dancers, strawberry fruit-hat) abound, forming their own network of connections. A ruffling of gender associations is also apparent here. There are beautiful women but one, from original painting by Manet, is in the costume of a male bullfighter, and there are beautiful young men but one, from a painting by Veneto (fig 3), has a large white flower attached to his hat with a small boy placed in the centre of the petals<sup>7</sup>. Wherever we look, read and touch we are nudged off-balance and not allowed to rest on one plane of experience (fig 3). Lighter images are deflected by images of people carrying weighty loads or burdened with work: an Italian family with the mother carrying sheets of leather for making boots, men bent spraying pesticide with the insertion of a rock (with previous reference to Magritte) on his back, a collage of an old man carrying a large crate labelled ‘US Census’. Images connect, but also clash with both the formal rows of text and each other, never settling.

The book is both an object and method, as underlined by the presence of recurring images of people’s hands. The model as bullfighter is pointing her sword upwards and we recall the street musician in the opening page pointing at us directly, but there are also hands holding implements, indicating, conducting, welcoming, stirring, dancing and enfolding that prevail throughout<sup>8</sup>. Mona Lisa, with acknowledgement to Duchamp, is presented this time enfolding in her arms a straw hat and bottles of perfume, a parade mannequin grasps Punch and Judy puppets, the Renaissance painting of lovers playing chess is emphasised by tracing the outline of the man’s hand moving the piece to win the game. And hands link to prevalent lines of string that are drawn across many pages, leading to, or anticipating balloons held by children, often indicated by cut-out circles (fig 3). It is Cornell’s hands that have left more than their imprint here as they cut and paste, draw and scribble across the manual to generate interminable relational spaces travelling, collecting, colliding and reassembling. If it is a book for the child in the adult, the former is mischievous and daring. Our child-adult hands are invited to draw lines of connection, to cut our own way through and join the chandeliers, balloons, floats, ships, or yes, carrots, in an endless exploration that insists on being untitled. We are not allowed to pin it down. Against the background of the formal agricultural manual we find, to return to Foucault’s account of heterotopia, ‘complex figures, with tangled paths, strange places, secret passages and unexpected communications’. Individual pages work in similar ways to Cornell’s series of themed shadow boxes, but here the degree of playfulness reaches a different level which is heightened by the backdrop of the formality and conventionalism of the journal (fig 4). It competes with heterotopia because it is both displaced and displacing. An unfinished private game unintended for public view and possibly forgotten by the artist but, as with Borges’ Chinese encyclopaedia, we are left with something that stretches and questions the way in which we customarily parcel out the world. Its force is not as explosive or as destructive as Borges’ conception, but its associations do not add up or accumulate anywhere; they unsettle, clash and cancel each other out. Unfinished, untitled, overlooked and isolated – all help to free it from the burden of influences and intention.

Fig 4



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<sup>1</sup> The art historian George Didi-Huberman is introducing an exhibition entitled *Atlas, How to Carry the World on One's Back*. The exhibition responded to Aby Warburg's unfinished (1924-1929) 'Mnemosyne Atlas', a collection of art-historical, cosmographical and contemporary images that were pinned on 63 wooden panels covered with black cloth and that he constantly re-arranged to display with immediate haptic force the transformation, affinities and survival of certain symbolic images. Although this colossal project cannot be compared to Cornell's book-object either in its scope or endeavour, Didi-Huberman is here referring more widely to the work of certain artists and in this context refers also to Borges' 'atlas of the impossible' which so amused Foucault.

<sup>2</sup> The book-object was discovered by the curator Walter Hopps whilst sorting through Cornell's studio shortly after his death in 1972. The Philadelphia Museum of Art holds the fragile book which cannot be easily exhibited but they have helped to make it accessible through the publication of a wonderful facsimile of 60 pages and a CD which allows you to turn and inspect each page of the original. The publication also contains a very helpful series of short essays (Leppanen-Guerra and Tasjian, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Here I concentrate on Foucault's first account of heterotopia in the preface to 'The Order of Things'. As I have written elsewhere (see Johnson, 2008 and 2013), this and his other two accounts, which reflect on socio-cultural spaces, open many challenges and questions. Overall, I argue that heterotopia is best understood as a method that 'makes differences and unsettles spaces, sometimes exposing the extraordinary in the most ordinary of places. The marginal texts [by Foucault] highlight how our world is full of spaces that fragment,

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punctuate, transform, split and govern. Life is full of different ‘worlds’: miniature, transient, accumulative, disturbing, paradoxical, contradictory and excessive’ (Johnson, 2013: 796).

<sup>4</sup> See foot-note 2

<sup>5</sup> The cat engraving is an 18<sup>th</sup> century conceit – often satirical displaying an ass or monkey at an easel (see Ades, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> *Las Meninas* has sparked endless commentary and was reinterpreted by Picasso in 1957 some 58 times. It is a focus for a short essay by Foucault (1970 [1966] ) at the beginning of ‘The Order of Things’ after the preface that introduces the concept of heterotopia.

<sup>7</sup> As the notes to the CD resource indicate, the flower and child could be interpreted as underlining the medallion worn by the young man: an allegory of fortune and virtue. See also Leppanen-Guerra (2012: 55) on the gender significance of the cork oak tree illustration and the insertion of an alphabet chart.

<sup>8</sup> On one page Cornell circles the words *tenir la main* (to hold the hand).

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