Essay for Liner Notes: Visits with Joseph Cornell
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Visits with Joseph Cornell is a drama in five acts, a composition of verbal "foundlings." The setting is the Whitney Museum of American Art. In December 2001, we met five professional spirit mediums there, in front of three box constructions by Cornell ("Custodian — for M.M." [Marilyn Monroe], "Celestial Navigation," and "Rose Castle,") for sessions ranging from 45 to 90 minutes. We met each medium separately; none had any awareness of what the others had said, and none had prior acquaintance with Joseph Cornell or his work. Acting as interpreters, translators, and in two cases as a direct channel, they enabled us to have (and record) a series of enchanting, confounding, and surprising conversations with the spirit of this mythic artist.

But these encounters were only the beginning of this drama, and the provocation for complex and enjoyably unanswerable questions about who, or what, was talking — and why? We studied Cornell's diaries and his vast bibliography, learning one particular lesson over and over: Cornell (or, our idea of Cornell), with his love of word games, subtlety, and duplicity, would not make our process simple or straightforward. The recordings amounted to a rich mix of the mediums' factual errors, their personal biases, our own fantasies and desires, and the Cornell spirit's actual communications (and miscommunications). We would work from the premise that a séance is an allegory for the practices of history and identity construction.

Along the way, we became collectors, collagists, admirers. We found discarded toys, beautiful dried starfish, old books, records of 19th century Romantic music (including the Clara Schumann *Kinderscenen*, which provides the musical interludes for this cd) and concluded that they were all gifts from Cornell. We attempted to locate meaning in the relationships between seemingly irrelevant details. And we came to see the audio material as a set of performances, which, when edited, revealed a drama of identity construction.

In the prologue we meet the mediums, five people whose notions of *how* and *why* spirits speak vary as much as their methods of translating

that speech. Still, they present a remarkably consistent picture: Paula Roberts depicts a man who spoke in "spews;" Karl Petry sees a man ill at ease with his image; Clyde Derrick describes a fragile man who communicates reluctantly, "like a sea anemone"; and Valerie Winborne, speaking in a trance as Cornell, stutters and whispers, inventing her own words and mocking ours. A tricky theme arises: Does the spirit even want to talk to us?

According to his various other franchise holders, (biographers, historians) Cornell was eccentric and reclusive – preferring his art, letters, the telephone, and his compulsive diary-writing to face-to-face contact. His manner could be courtly, but his mistrust of visitors-especially those curious about his art-was legend. By many accounts he was not beyond inviting some guests inside while making others wait for hours on his front porch, or requiring that conversations with him take place across adjoining rooms. Hence our apprehension: "Who says he wants to say anything*?*" asks Paula, and it seemed like a fair question.

In Act 1 the mediums offer an inventory of names, dates, trivia and details - a spew indeed! Some comments float unmoored to the historical record and raise serious questions about the bias of the mediums or the accuracy of their technique. At other times, descriptions of the characters in Cornell's life and some of his preoccupations are stunningly, literally, and tragically accurate (e.g. Adam Bernstein's reference to the stabbing death of Cornell's friend Joyce Hunter). Act 1 concludes with a monologue: "History lies perpendicular to your own experience," cautions the Cornell spirit (through Valerie). It isn't easy to be discussed, dissected, pinned down by the details that others dig up and assign, he seems to be saying. "The surrounding circumference" is where we find our "utopia," he concludes.

From 1923 until his death in 1972, Cornell made experimental films, collages, and box constructions in the basement and kitchen of a small house at 3708 Utopia Parkway, in Queens, N.Y. Following a personal logic based on memory, fantasy, and research, he assembled collections of paper ephemera that chronicled his diverse obsessions which included 19th century French ballerinas; Renaissance Italy; the poetry of Gérard de Nerval, Stephane Mallarmé, Emily Dickinson, and Marianne Moore; various constellations; *the* flora and fauna in his back-yard; Marcel Duchamp and his work; Christian Science philosophy;

and Susan Sontag, and many more. These “dossiers” were the basis for many of his boxes, which he often made in series, with subtle variations, moveable parts, unreachable secrets, changing titles, and extreme care. These objects, which can be held in one’s hands and viewed up close, are “not mere boxes,” according to Valerie/Cornell. They are the refuge of “foundlings,” spirit made manifest, “simple games with great intelligence within.”

Celestial Navigation, ca. 1960, is the work that elicits many of the comments in Act 2. The mediums and Cornell grapple with questions typical of art history and criticism: Where? When? How? What? In Act 3 they tackle a harder question: Why? Cornell was never fond of answering such questions, so when Karl Petry identifies *Celestial Navigation* as a throwaway, something made to satisfy a craven audience of art lovers by a “snickering” Cornell, it’s hard not to think that it’s us Cornell is snickering at, or possibly the entire edifice of history, criticism, and curatorial license. But perhaps the snicker is more complex: “I snickered when I made everything,” says Clyde/Cornell; and a “snicker”, says Valerie/Cornell, is a “great thought,” one that should be left to inspire, not questioned.

Shortly after the interviews were completed, we learned that “Snickie” was Cornell’s name for his beloved brother, Robert, with whom he shared a household, jokes, secrets, and his faith for 63 of his 69 years. This other “snicker” is a major focus in Act 4. The spirits of Robert and Helen, Cornell’s mother, “come through” with him, according to the mediums. We assume that when Clyde hears a “Richard,” he is mishearing “Robert”—and that when he identifies this Richard as a lover, he is interpreting the force of love and physical contact of a tender caregiver: Robert suffered from cerebral palsy from the age of 2, and Cornell was his lifelong aid. The Cornell spirit concludes this act with a lament, saying that he wishes he had understood and experienced love in his life as a “form in and of itself,” to be embraced and enjoyed (“as opposed to love as great inspiration”).

Finally, in Act 5, we move with the spirit into the present. What is he doing now? Haunting, of course, but for different reasons and in different ways. Clyde sees him continuing his artwork, Adam sees him teaching, and Paula believes that “he is no longer he… he is not sitting up on a pink cloud somewhere continuing to make this sort of work.” We find that when it comes to the truly unknowable—where we go after we die—spirit mediums disagree just as much as the rest of us.

How can these radically divergent approaches to spirit be reconciled? We can venture one answer: spirit is a text, a source text that may be ethereal, or lost, or rewriting itself through translation. *Visits with Joseph Cornell* is a document of that translation, and possibly also an allegory : a meditation on the delights and misfortunes of language encountered by all of us attempting to build and rebuild an artist named Joseph Cornell.

—— Anne Walsh and Chris Kubick