

# BETWEEN ART AND LIFE

## From Joseph Cornell to Gabriel Orozco

November 28, 2003 – April 4, 2004



Miami Art Museum





Gabriel Orozco, *Long Yellow Hose*, 1998. Cibachrome print. Collection Miami Art Museum, gift of the Disaronno Originale Photography Collection. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. Photo: Peter Hardholdt.

# ONE OF THE MOST COMPELLING STORY LINES THAT CAN BE TRACED AS WE LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF MODERN ART HAS BEEN THE CONTINUING EROSION OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ART AND LIFE FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT.

For much of the history of Western art, art had been made to exist in a space separate from that of the viewer. Paintings had been shown within frames – often elaborately ornamented – and sculptures placed on pedestals to denote their difference from our world. Paintings and sculptures were also made from materials largely reserved for the realm of art: oil paint, marble, bronze. Art existed in a realm of ideality, while people lived in the realm of material reality.

That distinction began to break down in the early years of the 20th century. In 1912, Pablo Picasso pasted a piece of oilcloth with simulated chair caning onto one of his painted Cubist still-lives, then “framed” the oval composition with a piece of rope. These two elements “violated the separateness of the work of art, and threatened to obliterate the aesthetic distance between it and the spectator.”<sup>1</sup> For several years thereafter, Picasso and his Cubist colleagues, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, regularly pasted newspaper fragments into their still-life compositions. As these artists moved toward abstraction, the need to meticulously reproduce the look of objects was considered tedious and needlessly illusionistic. The incorporation of objects into artworks was a form of shorthand that also served to make the artwork completely contemporary. What after all, could be more contemporary, more “now” than the day’s newspaper?

In this exhibition, Kurt Schwitters’ 1921 collage *Spitzen*, exemplifies the intersection of “art” – oil paint – and “life” – fragments of printed papers – initiated by Picasso, Braque and Gris. But unlike these artists, who all eventually reverted to traditional oil painting, Schwitters would make the incorporation of objects from daily life – tickets, cards, printed letters, bits of wood, wheels, toys – into his paintings the defining characteristic of his work until the end of his life in 1948.

A second, even more radical, move toward breaking down the barrier between the world of art and the world of daily life was made by Marcel Duchamp in 1913, when he took the front fork and wheel of a bicycle, mounted them atop a stool and called it *Bicycle Wheel*. This “assisted readymade” was soon followed by the first true “readymade” – so-called because it was made entirely from a pre-existing artifact – his *Bottle Dryer* of 1914. In *Bottle Dryer*, Duchamp didn’t alter the object he had selected, a multi-pronged bottle drying rack, at all. By designating it as an artwork, Duchamp made two key declarations: that any manmade thing could be considered a work of art, thereby



Marcel Duchamp, *De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy (Boîte-en-valise)*, (From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy [Box in a Valise] Series D 1941/1961. Collection Miami Art Museum, museum purchase with funds from Lang Baumgarten as well as from Mimi Floback and Sally Ashton Story in memory of Jon Ashton. Photo: David Heald. ©Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Estate of Marcel Duchamp

erasing the distinction between art and life; and that the most fundamental act of art is not to craft an object or image, but to make a choice or decision.

Duchamp included reproductions of several of his “readymades” in his celebrated *Boîte-en-valise* (Series D, 1941/1961), a sort of retrospective of his career boxed like a salesman’s sample case, which he issued in a series of editions from 1942 to 1967. Included in the *Boîte* were, among other things, miniature replicas (ironically, handmade) of his “readymades”: *Fountain*, an upturned urinal; *Traveler’s Folding Item*, a cloth typewriter cover; and *Paris Air*, a glass ampoule containing air from Paris; as well as photo-reproductions of *Bicycle Wheel*, *Bottle Dryer* and *LHOOQ*, Duchamp’s notorious picture of the *Mona Lisa* altered by the addition of a drawn beard and mustache.

Helping Duchamp assemble the first edition of the *Boîte* was Joseph Cornell, himself a former textile salesman. Cornell made his first artwork in 1931, when he was 28 years old. He had been inspired by Max Ernst’s famous book of engraved book illustration collages *La Femme 100 têtes* (The Hundred Headless Woman). Collage allowed Cornell, who was untrained in art, to make images without learning how to draw or paint. He soon went from making collages with found images to making sculptures from both found objects and found images.

Cornell is best known for the glass-fronted shadow boxes he made from 1936 until the 1960s. Made from such disparate materials as cordial glasses, maps of the constellations, newspaper fragments, wooden balls, colored sand and texts and images culled from old books and magazines, these boxes serve as catalysts for free-associative daydreaming. Small in size, they are large in scale – poetic metaphors for the vastness of the romantic, imaginative life. Unlike his friend Duchamp, who used objects from the everyday world to question the nature of art, Cornell used objects and images to suggest that so-called “everyday life” was full of magic, mystery, and wonder.

The Cornell box in this exhibition, *A New Scale of Stellar Distances*, is from the 1960s, a period when Cornell reduced the imagery in his work to a few telling details set within pristine fields of thick white paint. It is accompanied by four collages from the 1950s and 1960s, when Cornell took advantage of the growing availability of colored magazine images to create his first collages since the 1930s. These late collages were made either by adding a few telltale images onto a background photo, or simply cropping and framing an existing photo. Cornell’s superb craftsmanship often makes it difficult to determine just how, or even whether, he has altered an image, thereby transforming the mundane and prosaic into the indeterminate and mysterious. Through these subtle alterations, Cornell can be said to be unlocking the hidden lives of images.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Recall*, 1990. Six-color offset lithograph on Arches paper. ULAE. Collection Miami Art Museum, gift of Ruth and Richard Shack in honor of Sue Graze. ©Robert Rauschenberg. Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo: Peter Harholdt.



“Painting relates to both art and life.

Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)”

– *Robert Rauschenberg*<sup>2</sup>

As the first artist to make the use of found images and objects his exclusive medium for his entire career, Cornell has had an enormous impact on artists who have come after him. One of his immediate successors was Robert Rauschenberg, who first met Cornell in the early 1950s, when they both showed their work at New York’s Stable Gallery. Soon thereafter, Rauschenberg began incorporating stuffed animals, pillows, radios, and other objects into his large-scale “combine” paintings. Where Cornell was hermetic, Rauschenberg was effusive. “The only difference between me and Cornell is that he put his work behind glass, and mine is out in the world,” Rauschenberg once said. “Cornell was rarifying the treasures of his thoughts, and I was trying to get people physically involved. He packed away objects, and I was *unpacking* them.”<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, Rauschenberg’s paintings became more conventionally two-dimensional. He used silkscreens to enlarge images found in newspapers and magazines and juxtaposed them together to suggest the frenetic pace of modern life. *Recall*, 1990, is a color lithograph that exemplifies Rauschenberg’s use of culled images. Since the late 1980s, Rauschenberg’s paintings have generally incorporated silkscreened or transferred copies of the artist’s own photographs, giving them a diaristic quality. *Red Sunday*, 1988, is from his ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange) series in which he traveled to eleven different countries around the world and created works based on the photographs he took there.

Since the 1960s, the incorporation or reproduction of objects and images from everyday life has become ubiquitous in art. Pop artist Andy Warhol used images of everything from Campbell’s soup cans to Marilyn Monroe to suggest that the mass media – in particular advertising – had infiltrated every corner of modern life and become the arbiter of significance. Claes Oldenburg changed the scale of household objects in order to emphasize their sculptural and associative qualities. The form of an ice bag, for example, conjured up images for him of “breasts, stomachs, spiderwebs, sponges, cupolas, and so on.”<sup>4</sup> On the West Coast, artists such as Jess and Wallace Berman followed Cornell’s lead by using collage to imbue the world with a sense of mystery, though often tinged by the suggestion of threat. For Ed Ruscha, subjects as prosaic as vacant lots and swimming pools became sources for the deadpan humor of his artist books.

Donald Lipski’s *Book Cart (His Name is Ron)*, 2003, made by stacking dozens of remaindered books into an open



Donald Lipski, *Book Cart (His Name is Ron)*, 2003. Books, mixed media. Collection Miami Art Museum, gift of Terri Hyland. Photo courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

bowl-like form, suggests the glut of modern consumer and media culture. The books themselves are identical copies of the biography of Ronald Goldman, the man killed with Nicole Simpson in the notorious O.J. Simpson affair, one of the premiere media spectacles of our time. Betye Saar's *Shine*, 1999, and Damien Hirst's *Oy*, 1997, are box assemblages quite different in tone from Cornell's elegiac boxes. Saar uses kitsch objects to underscore the ugly stereotyping of African-Americans in pre-"politically correct" popular culture. Hirst's glass-fronted medicine cabinet contains neatly aligned examples of dozens of different pills and containers, casting a cool eye on our modern day drug culture.

Westen Charles uses trophies left behind when his grandfather died to question the vanity of earthly accomplishment. Robert Chambers narrows the gap between art and life by creating sculptures made from fans and fabric (the kind once used in weather balloons) that seem to breathe like living beings. Tom Scicluna's installation looks like a table left behind from a recent museum reception or event, until one notices the glass full of water pinned some six feet above the floor between the table and the wall. What had seemed careless is understood to be intentional, a deceptively simple evocation of precariousness, instability, and the slow passing of time as one waits for the glass's inevitable fall. Guerra de la Paz make sculptures and environments from second-hand clothes that they accumulate in vast quantities. In *Eden*, 2003, they use these cast-offs to create a landscape that evokes a biblical paradise where all was new and unsullied.

Particularly since the 1970s, artists have been using a number of other strategies to blur the distinction between art and life, including performance activities documented through photography or video. In *Theme Song*, 1974, Vito Acconci

videotapes himself talking directly to the viewer. Shot from an odd angle that causes his face to dominate the screen, Acconci's monologue is insidious, even threatening. The artist seems able to seep through the transparent barrier that safely separates the viewer's space from that of the video. Ana Mendieta's *Silhueta Works in Mexico*, 1973-1977, is a series of photographs that documents – and freezes in time – a series of ephemeral interventions by the artist into the Mexican landscape. Using materials such as earth, branches, flowers, and fire, Mendieta imprints her silhouette onto the earth and sky.

John Espinosa and Luis Gispert are two artists who use photography to document idiosyncratic investigations into art and everyday life. In *wearing other people's clothes*, 1997, Espinosa presents a series of photographs that couple images of twelve of his friends with images of Espinosa himself dressed in the same clothes his friends are wearing. The result is a quirky and humorous meditation on personal identity and whether, in fact, clothes really do "make the man" (or woman). In his *Sneaking into Backyards* series from 1999, Gispert photographs himself breaking into enclosed backyards in different Miami neighborhoods, then shows what he found there, thereby stripping personal space of its privacy and baring private preference to public scrutiny.

Cindy Sherman, Anthony Goicolea, and Gabriel Orozco all use photography to throw into doubt the distinction between artifice ("art") and reality ("life"). In her celebrated *Film Stills*, 1978, Sherman creates a series of fabricated "found images" that look like publicity stills for movies from the 1950s or 60s. The images never seem natural but always staged, they are ambiguous moments excerpted from imagined narratives. Paradoxically, though Sherman is always the object of the photos, her persona remains a mystery: we know her only as interpreted through a series of alter egos. In contrast to this, Goicolea's photograph, *Whet*, 1999, seems plausible enough initially, until we realize that all the figures within his image are the same person: the artist. The digital manipulation of a number of photographs into one image results in a seamless collage that makes it impossible to see where reality ends and fiction begins.

This blurring between art and life, fiction and reality, the found and the fabricated lies at the heart of Gabriel Orozco's photographs, such as *Socks 1*, 1994, and *Long Yellow Hose*, 1998. The images have the look of street photography: images found and captured by the artist/photographer in his wanderings. And in fact some of them are. But others are situations created by the artist. *Long Yellow Hose*, for example, documents an installation by Orozco in the garden of the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego. In the installation, an improbably long hose snakes through the museum garden, repeatedly crossing the path. A museum visitor encountering the piece would naturally at first assume that an absent, and perhaps careless, gardener has left the hose out (a situation similar to the one created by Tom Scicluna in his installation for this exhibition). Only after following the hose and getting a sense of its length might the viewer finally begin to reconsider

– particularly since this is a contemporary art museum – and think that this situation is more artful than one first supposed. The effect of the photograph is similar. The viewer contemplates the gestural grace of the hose’s figure-eight configuration. Yet because it is an image, there is less reason to think this might not have been a found situation. Only after viewing a series of his photographs might it occur to you that these engaging situations may be less the result of chance than of artful intent and that Orozco is more sculptor than photographer.

In Orozco’s photographs, reality and artifice are indistinguishably intertwined, suggesting that “reality” itself may, in fact, be an artful contrivance, a frame we place around fragments of our world in order to understand it. As such, they are perhaps the

inverse of Cornell’s assemblages and collages, where the overtly artful juxtaposition of objects and images suggest a reality so complex and elusive that we can only glimpse its passing shadow. In either case, they suggest a world filled with hidden possibilities in which life can be as rich or mean as we choose it to be.

Peter Boswell  
*Assistant Director for Programs/Senior Curator*

*Between Art and Life: From Joseph Cornell to Gabriel Orozco* is organized by Miami Art Museum as part of its continuing series of permanent collection installations and is supported by MAM’s Annual Exhibition Fund.

- 1 William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961, p. 23.
- 2 Robert Rauschenberg, “Statement,” in Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Sixteen Americans*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959, p. 58.
- 3 Quoted in Deborah Solomon. *Utopia Parkway: The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, p. 237.
- 4 Barbara Haskell. *Claes Oldenburg: Object into Monument*. Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, 1971. p. 106

#### Acknowledgements

The six works by Joseph Cornell in this exhibition are the result of a recent donation to the museum from The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation. MAM is grateful for the foundation’s generosity, as well as that of all the donors of works to the museum’s permanent collection. The exhibition has been supplemented by generous loans from Charles Cowles, New York; Barry Friedman, Ltd., New York; George Lindemann, Miami Beach; Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York; James Rosenquist, Aripeka, Florida; Ruth and Marvin Sackner, Miami; Dennis and Debra Scholl, Miami; Odyssea Gallery, New York; Untitled Press, Inc., New York; and private collectors in Miami and New York.

Miami Art Museum



101 West Flagler Street  
Miami, Florida 33130  
305.375.3000

[www.miamiartmuseum.org](http://www.miamiartmuseum.org)

Accredited by the American Association of Art Museums, Miami Art Museum is sponsored in part by the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts; with the support of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Cultural Affairs Council, the Mayor and the Board of County Commissioners.

**COVER:** Joseph Cornell, *A New Scale of Stellar Distances*, 1960s. Mixed media box construction. Collection Miami Art Museum, gift of the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation. ©The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation. Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo: Peter Harholdt.