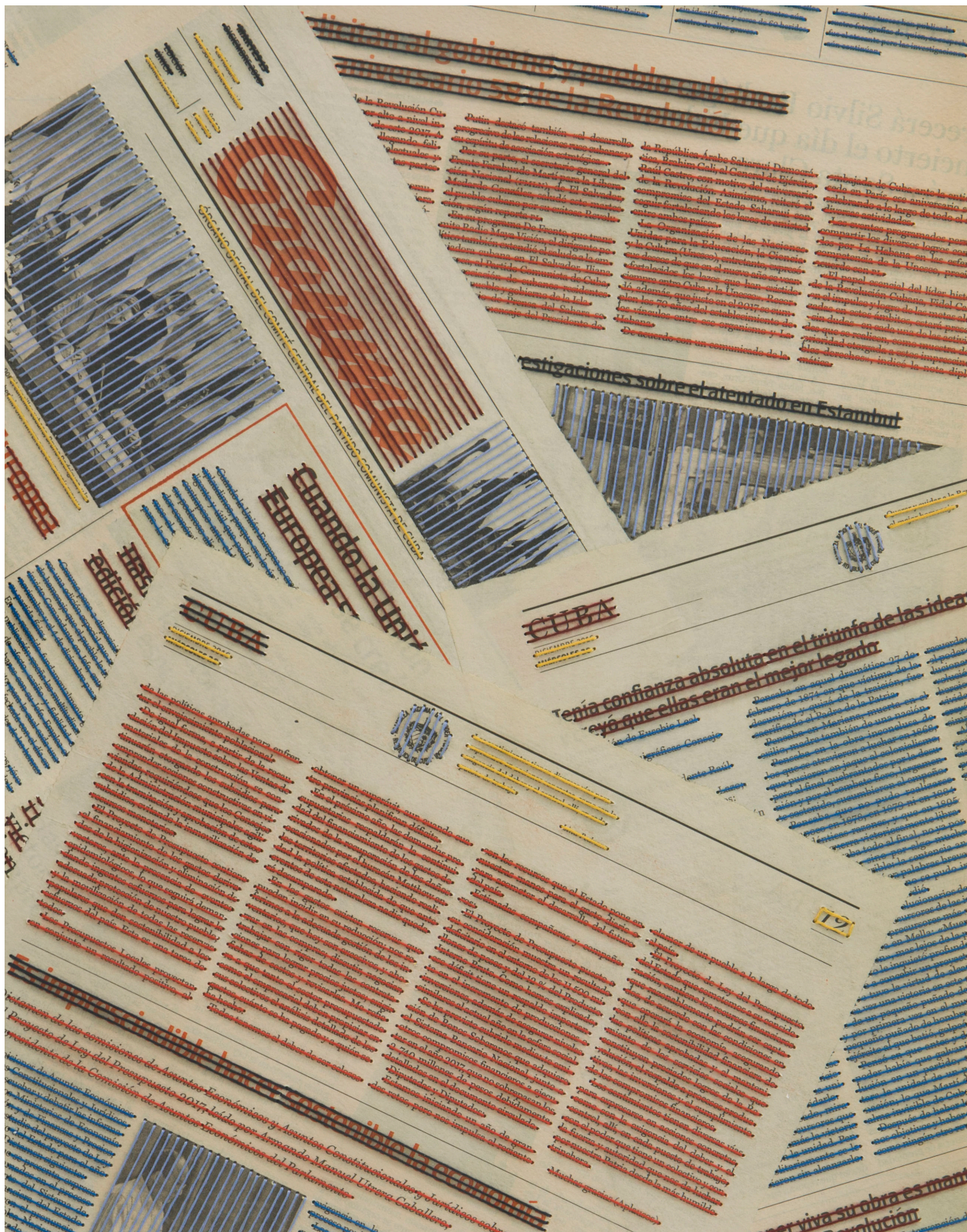


The Artist as Poet

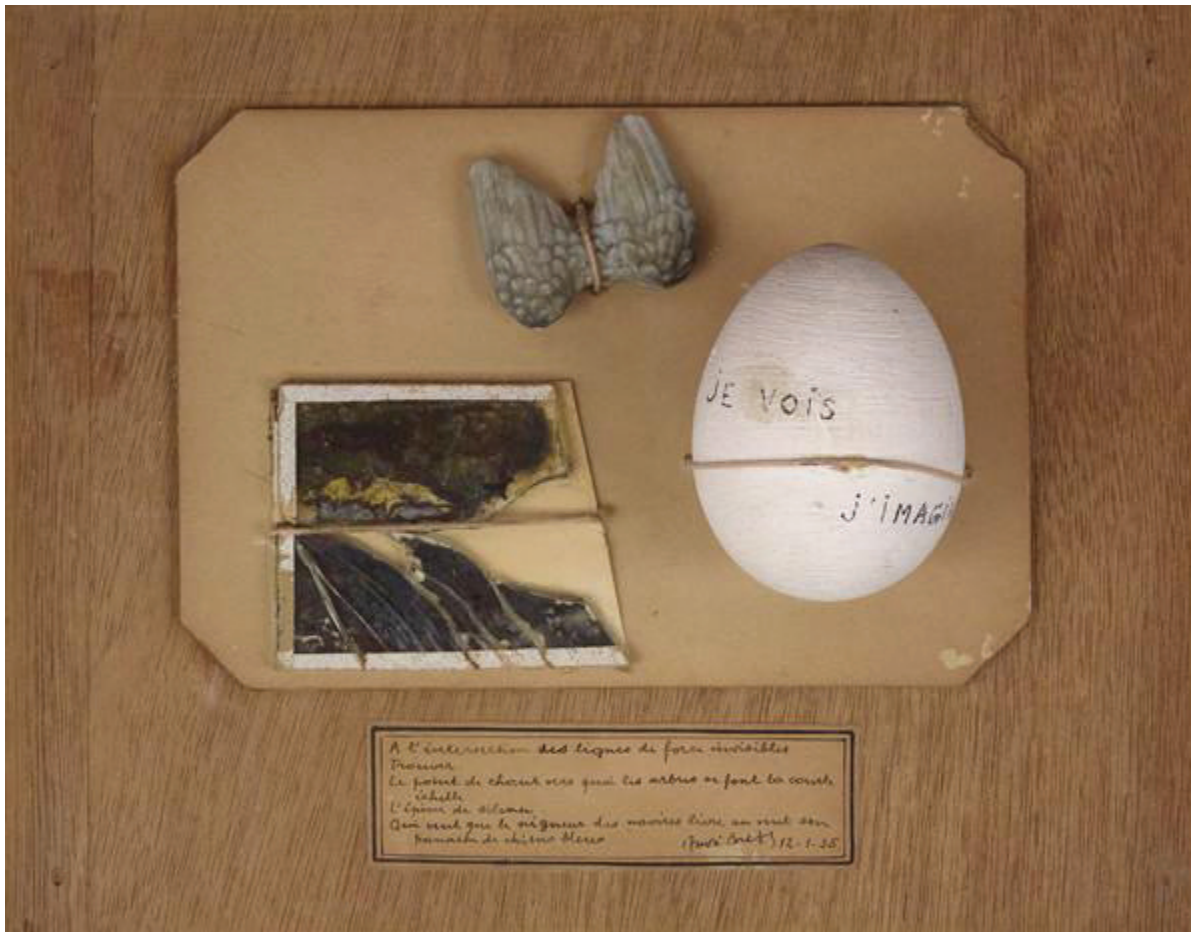
English



The Artist as Poet: Selections from PAMM's Collection

The *poème-objet* is a composition which combines the resources of poetry and plastic art, and thus speculates on the capacity of these two elements to excite each other mutually.

—André Breton, 1942¹



This exhibition centers on the Surrealist concept of the *poème-objet* (poem-object) and its impact on modern and contemporary art. André Breton (1896–1966), the principal theorist of literary Surrealism, often discussed the ways in which texts and objects could work together, each playing its own role in a single work. The works in *The Artist as Poet* span the ten decades between 1917 and 2020 and represent how language—specifically poetry—is variously used in art, while shedding light on Surrealism’s enduring influence. The artists in the exhibition experiment with language either by incorporating text in the works themselves or by giving the works poetic or playful titles. The selection includes handmade books, paintings, found objects, constructions, and collages—the flat precursor to the three-dimensional Surrealist object. Selected from PAMM’s permanent collection, these works explore what it means to classify the “artist as poet.”

An authoritative and complex man, Breton was Surrealism’s leader and cofounder. Though best known for his writing, he was also an artist, dabbling in the creation of poem-objects since 1929. While he did not formally define the poem-object until 1942, Breton spoke and wrote about the “possibility and the great interest of the experiment that consists of incorporating objects, ordinary or not, within a poem, or more exactly of composing a poem in which visual elements take their place between the words without ever duplicating them,” as early as 1935 in a lecture titled “Surrealist Situation of the Object.”² Breton’s artistic practice is a reflection of what he considered to be the “ideal” Surrealist medium, combining objects, poetry, automatism (in which the artist suppresses conscious control over the art-making process), and various other elements important within the Surrealist tradition in one artwork, the poem-object.

The Artist as Poet highlights the ways in which Surrealism’s poem-objects may have directly or indirectly influenced subsequent works that incorporate both text and found objects. It attempts to bring forward Breton’s own words and definition of the poem-object, allowing the viewer to see how this tradition has shape-shifted into the more contemporary works represented. The exhibition also dives into the rich tradition of bookmaking. The ultimate goal is to reassess Breton’s definition of the poem-object in light of later artistic currents that he could not even have imagined. Breton’s own artistic practice is not intended to loom over the exhibition, but instead to serve as a reference point, an opportunity for engagement among modern and contemporary works made in entirely different circumstances than his own. Many of the works on view

reference seminal literary sources, adding new meanings to familiar texts in order to reflect upon a variety of contemporary conditions related to displacement, immigration, gender and racial identity, and the human psyche.

Breton described poem-objects as “combining the resources of poetry and sculpture and in speculating on their reciprocal powers of exaltation.”³ From 1934 onward, he published a series of theoretical texts focusing on the nature of the object, principally as a vehicle for self-exploration. Because Breton saw these works as a way of diving deeply into one’s own subconscious, they are ultimately and fundamentally personal. In the creation of his poem-objects, Breton also used automatic writing—the practice of writing what comes to mind without filter or editing—another primary method for understanding one’s unconscious desires.

To meet the challenge of incorporating automatism into sculpture, Breton suggested that objects encountered in dreams could be reproduced upon waking and then analyzed to reveal their true psychological content. Breton’s ultimate intention, which he pursued in theory more than in practice, was to employ the poem-object’s potential for self-discovery as a means to replace painting and photography as the ideal Surrealist medium.

The Artist as Poet is organized in two sections, the first of which focuses on landmark texts and book making. These works illustrate how literature has served as a chief influence in general. *Amerika the Stoker* (1993–94), by Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), makes direct reference to Franz Kafka’s first novel, *Amerika* (1984–89), whose initial chapter was published separately as a short story titled “The Stoker.” Rollins and the collaborating artists used the novel as a starting point and then brainstormed how to bring its subject matter to life. The work not only contains references to *Amerika* in the form of the golden horn motif, but it also incorporates actual book pages as part of its materials. Published posthumously in 1927, Kafka’s *Amerika* revolves around a young immigrant to the United States who struggles to navigate an oppressive, bureaucratic system lorded over by shadowy, authoritarian figures. This storyline encapsulates the Czech author’s central theme of modern alienation, yet here this alienation is layered with the sense of cultural displacement that often accompanies immigration.

Glenda León presents a book made by combining the sacred texts of five religions: The Bhagavad-Gita (Hinduism), the Torah (Judaism), the Anguttara Nikaya (Buddhism), the Bible

¹ André Breton, “Du poème-objet,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Macdonald, 1972), 284. ² André Breton, “Surrealist Situation of the Object,” lecture, Mánes Gallery, Prague, March 29, 1935. ³ André Breton, “Du poème-objet,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, 284.



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(Christianity), and the Quran (Islam), resulting in *El libro de la fe* (*The Book of Faith*, 2015). The title of the work is on the cover, but because the cover and the title are both white, the words blend into the book's surface. The color white includes all the colors of the visible spectrum, which the artist uses as a metaphor for erasing the differences among religions. León's starting references are books that have shaped world history, yet she simplifies these works that carry so much weight into a work that celebrates shared experiences.

Alfredo Jaar's *I Can't Go On. I'll Go On.* (2016) illustrates in neon a line from Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel *The Unnamable*. This quote encapsulates the emotional pendulum that swings back and forth between despair and the determination to survive, providing a window into the inner lives of innumerable victims and survivors of violence and poverty throughout the world. In his large triptych *Dante's Divine Comedy: Il Paradiso, Il Purgatorio, L'Inferno* (1972–75), Paul Laffoley applies his dual training as an architect and a classics scholar to depict another world, drawing on a close reading of Dante Alighieri's spatial descriptions of heaven, hell, and purgatory to render precise diagrammatic representations. The triptych exemplifies Laffoley's penchant for rationalizing metaphysical and fantastical concepts, such as the mythic origins of the

cosmos, time travel, and the pseudo-spiritual undercurrents of premodern mathematics.

The second section of the exhibition revolves around self-reflection, referencing the Surrealists' use of automatic writing and their interest in psychoanalysis and the subconscious. The work of María Martínez-Cañas focuses on identity and memory while also serving as a reflection on her own identity and personal story of displacement and immigration. *Años Continuos* (*Continuous Years*, 1994) combines photographs, travel documents, and images of maps as a means of conveying the artist's sense of physical and cultural dislocation from her native Cuba; the symbols create a rich visual collage exploring issues relating to personal history, cultural identity, and the passage of time.

Joseph Cornell's works are also rooted in self-reflection. Though he never left New York City, famously living in the same house on Utopia Parkway in Queens for most of his life, Cornell explored the world through literature and travel guidebooks, which he incorporated into his box constructions and collages. His works require the viewer to peer into them as opposed to standing back and admiring. They are grounded in contemplation, providing an inside look into the artist's mind.

In line with his passion for poetry and literature, Breton insisted that works created under the umbrella of Surrealism should have a poetic component. Throughout the history of Surrealism, artists created numerous objects paying homage to literary giants such as the influential art critic, theoretician, and advocate of the early 20th-century Parisian avant-garde Guillaume Apollinaire, who is also represented in this exhibition. One of the first practitioners of modern visual poetry, in 1917 Apollinaire organized an exhibition of works by Léopold Surville and Irène Lagut. The accompanying exhibition catalogue includes 13 visual prose poems that take the form of horses, clocks, flowers, and other pictorial motifs. This rare edition of the catalogue is among only ten copies the author tinted by hand with watercolor. Apollinaire is also considered one of the forefathers of the Surrealist movement, having been a major influence on the young poets who later formed the nucleus of the Surrealist group, such as Louis Aragon, Breton, and Philippe Soupault. In fact, Apollinaire coined the word “surrealist” in 1903, which he suggested to mean “beyond reality.”

Over a span of nearly five decades, self-taught Liberty City-born artist Purvis Young created thousands of paintings on found plywood, discarded cloth, cast-off furniture, and other urban debris, hanging them on the walls of boarded-up buildings along Northwest 14th Street at 2nd Avenue in Miami’s Overtown neighborhood, a stretch known as Good Bread Alley. *Untitled* (1976) is made from a found hardcover book that Young filled with the symbols and imagery he came to be recognized for.

Young’s images add up to an epic, fantastical representation of the history of Overtown—from the demolition of Black-owned homes and businesses for the sake of highway construction in the mid-1960s to the rebellions that followed the acquittal of four police officers responsible for the death of Arthur McDuffie in 1980. Over the years, Young developed a highly recognizable lexicon of symbols and recurring forms: figures with arms upraised in a gesture of protest, despair, or aspiration; horses, representing spiritual release and freedom; trucks and trains like those that rumble through Overtown on their way to and from the Port of Miami, symbolizing the elusive possibility of escape or of material assistance from the outside world; and the looming heads of angels, which protect the once-thriving neighborhood while serving as witnesses to the pain and struggle of those who live there.

Surrealism is among the best-known art historical movements of the 20th century, and its customs and characteristics have inspired artists for decades. The poem-object is ever-developing. Artists have continuously reinvented this combination, exploring the ways in which it can inform us of our commonalities and raise awareness of our shared human experiences. The works reveal the artist’s psyche while also functioning as mirrors for the viewer to plumb his or her own psychological depths. Perhaps Breton would have seen these works as extensions of the Surrealist tradition he helped establish.



The Artist as Poet: Selections from PAMM's Collection
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Images

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| Cover | Aimée García Marrero, <i>Sin título</i> , 2017. Mixed media, 17 1/4 x 15 1/4 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jorge M. Pérez |
| 1 | André Breton, <i>Poème Objet</i> [Poem-Object], 1935. © 2021 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris |
| 2 | Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), <i>Amerika the Stoker</i> , 1993–94. Acrylic on book pages on linen, 66 x 91 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by PAMM's Collectors Council |
| 3 | Glenda León, <i>El libro de la fe</i> (The Book of Faith), 2015. Artist book, 30 x 45 x 4 inches. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jorge M. Pérez |



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