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Mark Silverberg

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New (sur)realisms: the recombinant arts of Jane Hammond and John Ashbery

MARK SILVERBERG

Abstract This article traces the relationships between Jane Hammond's painting and John Ashbery's poetry, focusing particularly on Hammond's sixty-two painting series, *The John Ashbery Collaboration*, and the poet's concurrent volume, *And the Stars Were Shining*. Both artists have significant debts to, and at the same time doubts about, Surrealism, and these conflicts and congruencies lead to a Neo-surrealist aesthetic that revises various Surrealist techniques of collage, collection, and recombinatory practice.

Keywords Surrealism, Neo-surrealism, New York School, John Ashbery, Jane Hammond, artistic collaboration

Imagine that a pack of giant tarot cards has been washed away on a flood and ended up in the basement of a parking garage where a splinter group of freemasons is about to hold its annual revel. Or that you've wandered into the warehouse where the Ark of the Covenant got squirreled away in Raiders of the Lost Ark on the day of its annual sale of unclaimed items, which include bats, butterflies, Balinese shadow-puppets, and a gargoyle in a Henry Dager pinafore.¹

Thus begins John Ashbery's introductory essay to Jane Hammond's 2001 show, *The John Ashbery Collaboration*: with a prolonged, profuse, alliterative list of bizarre but essentially Ashberian and Hammondian *stuff*. Both the form of the list (and along with it, the forms of the collage, the scrapbook, and various other collections) and its curious objects ("bats, butterflies, Balinese shadow-puppets") are principal exhibits in these two artists' *œuvres*. To imagine these *œuvres* as museums of a sort is one strategy of this article, which will read their overlapping visions through Hammond's collaborative approach to Ashbery. Another tactic for this paper is suggested by Ashbery's favorite not-quite Surrealist, Giorgio de Chirico, who invites viewers to "live in the world as if in an immense museum of strangeness, full of curious many-colored toys which change their appearance, which, like little children we sometimes break to see how they are made on the inside, and, disappointed, realize they are empty."²

Prying open Hammond's and Ashbery's toys, as this article proposes to do, we may well discover that they are "empty," but this will not be cause for disappointment. On the contrary, it is less their ever-elusive "heart" that is important (i.e. what is *behind* the darkened windows or drawn stage curtain in a Giorgio de Chirico or Hammond painting or an Ashbery poem) than the ever-engaging process of exploration—a pleasurable breaking open and poking of the magical innards that recurs with each individual reading and viewing. Ultimately, my intention is not to solve but to celebrate the "enigmas" (to use one of de Chirico's favorite terms), of *The John Ashbery Collaboration*, tracing a path of Neo-surrealist activity that has come to fill the spaces opened by some of Ashbery's and

Hammond's acknowledged precursors and influences: André Breton, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Joseph Cornell, Raymond Roussel, and especially de Chirico who, Ashbery says, is "not strictly speaking a Surrealist," but is, perhaps because of his very refusal of the label, "in a sense the one great Surrealist painter."³

Though Ashbery and Hammond, like many of their contemporaries who have clearly been attracted to, and influenced by, Surrealism, rarely make specific distinctions or categorizations within the movement, it is worth pausing on this question to begin sorting out their relation to this unwieldy category. In a useful essay on Elizabeth Bishop's "everyday surrealism," Ernesto Suarez-Toste, following the work of William Rubin, distinguishes between the "academic-illusionistic-*oneiric*" Surrealist branch (initiated by de Chirico's *pittura metafisica* and exemplified in the work of René Magritte) and the automatist-abstract branch (theorized most fully by Breton and exemplified by André Masson or Joan Miró).⁴ Perhaps because of Breton's ubiquity, as well as his success in group formation and regulation, the automatist branch seems to have become the *de facto* definition of Surrealism for the general public. In their discussions of Surrealism as a movement, Ashbery and Hammond also fall back on this reduction of Surrealism to automatism. At the same time, reading their artistic practice we can see the influence of de Chirico and the *oneiric* more clearly, a component that has been key in the development of Post-surrealism.

What Ashbery and others admired about de Chirico, I suspect, was not only his refusal of Surrealist dogma as formulated by Breton, nor only the later Bretonian rejection of de Chirico (though these could not have hurt), but rather the painter's unique, maverick style and aesthetic theory—summarized by Suarez-Toste as the "academic-illusionistic-*oneiric*." De Chirico's "metaphysical painting," "a fatal net that catches mysterious butterflies" (in the artist's more felicitous definition from "On Metaphysical Art")⁵ is a philosophy and style that resulted in his best-known and most highly

regarded early work (from about 1912–19). Its “academic” qualities are related to his obsessive focus on mathematics and geometry, his “neoclassical revival of the Renaissance heritage of architectural perspective.”⁶ At the same time, the style is “illusionistic” in that what appear at first to be balanced, mathematically, and psychologically secure spaces are in fact “fatal nets” for perception: “Foreshortened or tilted planes, multiple and conflicting vanishing points, and the use of pseudo-modeling (flattened or low relief) all tend to dislocate the viewer and provoke spatial anxiety.”⁷

These early paintings juxtapose neoclassical features of architecture, statuary, and ruins with contemporary signs such as trains, railway stations, and mannequins, staged in an uncanny atmosphere of melancholy or loss, “a solitude of dreams” as de Chirico calls it.⁸ The canvases are almost always devoid of people, but populated instead by their absent signs: shadows, statues, dummies, and anatomical dolls. This is the dream-like space of Enigma that Ashbery and Hammond find so compelling: the dream-like space of Enigma that Ashbery and Hammond find so compelling:

We who are learned in the signs of the metaphysical alphabet know what joy and what suffering are to be found in a portico, a street corner or in a room, on the surface of a table or within the sides of a box.⁹

A somewhat different route into the surreal is followed by Breton who, in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), defines the “movement” (a term de Chirico would never use) in terms of its founding technique:

SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

ENCYCLOPEDIA. *Philosophy.* Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in the solving all the principal problems of life.¹⁰

Automatism, the disinterested play of thought, and the omnipotence of dream will be key exhibits in Ashbery’s and Hammond’s museums, inherited from a canon of preoccupations expounded by Breton, and naturalized between the wars by expatriate Surrealists and their American compatriots. By the time both Hammond and Ashbery came to it, however, Surrealism had become both one of the great informing practices and one of the great clichés of twentieth-century art. The development of their work was, in part, an answer to the problem of what contemporary artists could do with the Surrealist heritage.

In an essay on the Museum of Modern Art’s 1968 Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage show, Ashbery cites James Schulyer’s comment about “one’s love–hate relationship with Surrealism,” a phrase that well describes Ashbery’s own conflicted attitude about a movement that had become utterly absorbed by popular culture.

Surrealism has become part of our daily lives, its effects can be seen everywhere in the work of artists and writers who have no connection with the movement, in movies, interior decoration and popular speech. A degradation? Perhaps. But it is difficult to impose limitations on the unconscious, which has a habit of turning up in unlikely places.¹¹

While celebrating the work of many official and unofficial Surrealists, Ashbery has also expressed frustration with the movement’s “excommunications, anathematizations, political manifestations and internecine bickering of all kinds”¹² and concern with its hypocritical philosophy that celebrated sexual liberty but banned homosexuality. Perhaps most importantly, Ashbery has often wondered, as de Chirico had before, about the prescriptive “freedom” of its chief method.¹³ “What’s so free about that?” he writes of automatism. “Real freedom would be to use this method where it could be of service and to correct it with the conscious mind where indicated.”¹⁴ Ashbery’s work, imbued in so many ways with the spirit and mechanics of Surrealism (“we are all indebted to Surrealism;” he writes, “the significant art of our time could not have been produced without it”¹⁵), can also be seen as a case study in its “correction,” as this article will show.

Hammond, who “came of age in the post-minimal late 1970s,” as she notes in a personal interview, inherited many of Ashbery’s generation’s biases against Surrealism as well as adding some of her own quarrels with the “orthodoxies of surrealism [as she saw them] that are so worshipping at the altar of Freud and involve patently irrational material—burning giraffes and such—that aren’t that interesting anymore because they’ve been so coopted by advertising.”¹⁶ Ultimately for Hammond, Surrealism “was the art that was held in low regard when I was coming of age as an artist and I can’t get over that.”¹⁷ Once again, though, we need to understand these comments in context with a body of work that is inescapably imbued with the spirit, mood, and atmosphere of Surrealism. Like Ashbery’s, Hammond’s art should be seen as a Neo-surrealist correction or working through. Both artists’ worlds—with their emphases on the oneiric, on metaphysical juxtaposition, on “changing the rules of space”¹⁸—offer fascinating case studies in Surrealism’s ever-mutating gene, its changing forms in post-war New York. These forms are on particularly vibrant display in the Hammond’s *The John Ashbery Collaboration*.

In 1993, New York painter Hammond called up Ashbery and asked if he would send her a list of titles with which to begin a new series of paintings. Hammond had first met Ashbery in 1989 when she attended his Harvard University

Norton lecture on Raymond Roussel and soon developed a friendship based on their mutual admiration of one other's work. "In about four minutes, I had made a tour of a walled-off room somewhere in my subconscious and returned with a clutch of 'titles' which were actually labels of curios in my own musée imaginaire."¹⁹ This four-minute raid on the subconscious is reminiscent of the multiple legends of automatic or instant creation that the New York School poets favored. In one such apposite story, David Lehman recounts how Ashbery wrote the entire Harvard Roussel lecture on the day of the presentation in the back seat of a car travelling from Manhattan to Cambridge.²⁰ While the origin story behind the collaboration begins with Bretonian automatism, it ends with de Chirican academic-illusionist-oneiricism: a series of sixty-two mysterious and meticulously crafted paintings, produced over eight years from Ashbery's faxed list of forty-four idiosyncratic titles such as *The Soapstone Factory*, *A Parliament of Refrigerator Magnets*, *Bread and Butter Machine*, *Midwife to Gargoyles*, and *Tom Tiddler's Ground*. Furthermore, this unusually "distant" collaboration continued as Ashbery reappropriated several of his titles—and with them the metaphysical question and dynamics of *tilling* itself—in his 1994 volume *And the Stars Were Shining*. Both works, I suggest, highlight the collector's art, the gathering of "curious many-colored toys" for the profit and pleasure of both curator and audience.

Entering *The Soapstone Factory*

We might begin this study of Surrealism's (and, more broadly, Modernism's) renovation in the work of Hammond and Ashbery by following the painter into Ashbery's *The Soapstone*

Factory (1988) (figure 1). Hammond has transformed Ashbery's title into a fantastic artist's studio-museum where dancing elephants, acrobats, ballerinas, and Buddhas balance an array of oddments (shrimp cocktail dishes, teacups, a seahorse) while themselves being balanced and displayed on a series of plinths from which they seem to have been recently carved. In the painterly tradition of the studio interior, these dreamlike creature-creations seem to be the handiwork of an unseen artist behind this soapstone factory-studio. The space itself, particularly with its diffusely saturated red, is reminiscent of one of the most famous modern studio paintings, Henri Matisse's *Red Studio* (1911). By comparing the two works, we get a good sense of the distance Hammond has traveled from the Modernist moment.

Both paintings present the artist's space, creations, and tools. But where Matisse exhibits his recent *works*—singular paintings, sculpture, and ceramics—easily recognizable by the signatures of shape and color, Hammond displays something different. What we see in *The Soapstone Factory* is a collection of the artist's borrowed *images*, culled from various source texts, copied illustratively, and presented using the "recombinant" method for which she has become known. Before considering the differences in these images further, some background on Hammond's method is in order.

After studying poetry and biology as an undergraduate, Hammond earned art degrees in ceramics and sculpture, before moving to New York in 1977, a moment when, she notes, "it was very hip to have a strategy out of which to work."²¹ Her system involved a type of constrained collage where all Hammond's paintings would be built from



Figure 1. Jane Hammond, *The Soapstone Factory*, 1988. Oil on canvas with mixed media. 1.9 × 2.5 meters. Courtesy: Collection Stanley and Gail Richards, Des Moines.

a limited family of 276 images, selected from a large collection of books on a multiplicity of subjects: magic and molecular biology, puppetry and physics, knot-tying, alchemy, erotica, palmistry, phrenology, beekeeping, tango dancing, etc. Hammond says:

I latched onto [the term “recombinant”] as a way of describing how I am collaging. I was familiar with the term from biology particularly in relation to the way that a few amino acids can combine and recombine into a nearly endless variety of DNA components.²²

Thus, in *The Soapstone Factory*, ballerina and Buddha, elephant and giraffe, seahorse head and Magritte mermaid should not be taken as unique, expressive, painterly signs such as the ones on Matisse’s canvas, but rather as copied artifacts or found texts (a fact further suggested by their representation in uncolored, pencil-like sketches). Contra the modernist quest for the unique, with the studio (a metonymy for the artist’s mind) as the ne plus ultra of originality, Hammond converts the studio into a Warholian factory whose materials are prefabricated images. Hammond’s museum-studio (which bears an uncanny resemblance to an Ashbery poem) is a collection of second-hand, recycled images that can be used as raw material for construction. In Ashbery those recycled materials are often bits of language—clichés, overheard speech, homely phrases—that become the building blocks of his bricolage poems.

That each reproduction of an image from Hammond’s storehouse (take, for example, the multiple Buddhas in *The Soapstone Factory*, which also appear in other paintings) is slightly different in color, shade, or nuance only highlights the fact that each Buddha is a simulacrum, another imperfect copy of an absent original. Instead of a classical maker, the artist in this factory-studio seems to be a collector of “curios of my own musée imaginaire.” Similarly, the “author” in Ashbery’s poetry feels less like a unique, stable person or persona “speaking” to us (as he does in Frank O’Hara’s poetry, for example), and more like an elusive collector of images, scenes, and phrases.

While Surrealism is interested in discovering or creating unique marvelous objects (fur-lined teacups, lobster telephones, nail-clad irons) born of the “chance meetings” of incongruous phenomena, in Hammond’s and Ashbery’s museums there is no possibility of uniqueness. All objects have become second-hand; they have abandoned the fields of “reality” or “surreality” and self-consciously entered the field of representation, the space of construction or artwork. This is related to another important departure from Surrealism. For the committed Surrealist, *art* is never the point. It is, rather, a means to a revolutionary end. Breton repeatedly invoked and refigured the idea of a perceptual, psychological, sexual, and ultimately political *revolution*, such as in his 1934 lecture “What is Surrealism?”:

The surrealist project, beyond the limitations of space and time, can contribute to the efficacious reunification of all those who do not despair of the transformation of the world and who wish this transformation to be as radical as possible.²³

Since Surrealism must be “exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern,” according to the first manifesto, true believers must

struggle against the will of those who would maintain Surrealism on a purely speculative level and treasonably transfer it on to an artistic and literary plane (Artaud, Desnos, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Vitrac) at the cost of all the hope for subversion we have placed in it.²⁴

For Ashbery and Hammond, on the other hand, and indeed for most Post-surrealists, there is no concern for revolution. A “treasonable transfer to the artistic or literary plane” is the point: construction is for construction sake.

This indifference to “revolution” may be why, in contrast to the “total freedom” Ashbery questioned with Surrealism, he and Hammond often embraced the kind of formal constraint imposed on art by the Surrealists’ major challengers, the Oulipo group. Founded by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, Oulipo replaced the Surrealist dedication to dream and the unconscious with a commitment to producing from precise, rational, often mathematical restrictions (in forms such the lipogram, palindrome, heterogram, or Jean Lescure’s famous “N + 7” constraint, where every noun in a text is replaced with the noun seven entries after it in a dictionary). Queneau famously suggested that “an Oulipian author is a rat who himself builds a maze from which he sets out to escape,”²⁵ and we might see Ashbery’s and Hammond’s many conceptual constraints as similar kinds of the mazes. Instead of the problematic freedom of automatism, the Oulipian model offers “the freedom of difficulty mastered,”²⁶ an enticing option for artists struggling with their conflicted responses to Surrealism. While the effects produced by Surrealism and Oulipo are often hard to tell apart, it is nonetheless important for critics to distinguish the latter group as key historical initiators of Post-surrealism and influences on the New York School.

Returning to the two paintings, we might say that Hammond’s factory projects Matisse’s studio into a globalized, hyper-mediated, image-saturated future. Both present the studio as a magical, timeless place, but time and timelessness have a different feel and quality in each, as seen in their representations of clocks. Tellingly, each composition is centered on a stopped timepiece: in Matisse’s a grandfather clock with no hands, in Hammond’s a suspended hourglass. In Matisse, timelessness registers through color as purity, simplicity, and calm. “Modern art,” Matisse is frequently quoted as saying, “spreads joy around it by its color, which calms us.”²⁷ His studio presents this serene affect through impressionistic means: its color-field composition simplifies the space to one continuous sheet

of red, with no variation between walls and floor, and indeed no tonal forms interrupting the serenity of the scene. Hammond, on the other hand, literally shatters the calm of Matisse's studio with an explosion of not only pottery and stone fragments but also a profusion of incongruous images. Hammond's static timepiece is surrounded by a teacup, a seashell, a log, a board, an acrobat, and Magritte's famous reversed mermaid, all ironically placed on a plinth to suggest they have just been hand-carved (thus, not "real," but represented).

While Matisse's studio is highly impressionistic, Hammond's is architecturally precise and complex in its use of perspective to delineate various illusionistic spaces. Indeed, all is illusion in Hammond: her multiple soapstone factories—*The Soapstone Factory* (1998), *The Soapstone Factory 4* (1999), *Part-Time in the Library* (2000), *Goodnight Nurse* (2000–01), and *The Soapstone Factory* (2003)—keep the conveyor belt of representation turning by continually producing new commodities from its malleable (soapstone-like), recyclable material.

Hammond and Ashbery present a Neo-surrealism for a hyper-mediated age in which pre-existing images (and/or bits of language) are linked into new systems (paintings, poems) that, like their Surrealist ancestors, lie provocatively on the verge of legibility. Ashbery's description of Hammond's work applies impeccably to his own as well: "Finally, it seems these pictures tell us little, though we sense that there is a great deal that they *could* tell us if they were so minded."²⁸ Ashbery implicitly perceives a key quality of both their work, its provocative mixture of secrecy and excess, its offer to "tell all" without revealing anything.

One thing the works' profusion of imagery and language does tell (or foretell) in its hyper-abundance is the story of the progressively mediated world in which we live. Indeed "hypermedia," an extension of Theodor H. Nelson's 1960s' coining "hypertext," is a useful term for conceptualizing the process of collecting and linking samples of consciousness that underwrites Ashbery's and Hammond's compositions. "Hypertext" refers to then-new kinds of multilinear and non-sequential texts that branch in multiple directions and allow choices for users. The internet (which, appropriately, has become in the years since *The John Ashbery Collaboration*, a major resource for Hammond's art in the form of recombinant photography)²⁹ remains our most sophisticated hypertextual system, allowing users to traverse a seemingly endless series of texts, images, sounds, and data through a nearly infinite number of paths. Hammond's and Ashbery's compositions can likewise be seen as environments that collect, sample, and link disparate sources of text, image, and information and offer them to readers who might access them through multiple, branching paths. These "indeterminate" pathways, in the frequently cited thought of Marjorie Perloff, "do not coalesce into a symbolic network" so that readerly "expectations of causality, of relatedness are never fulfill[ed]."³⁰ Instead, they provide instances of both possibility and secrecy, meaning and its deferral. To continue Ashbery's description of Hammond's work from above:

we sense that there is a great deal that they *could* tell us if they were so minded. What they do leave us with is the sense of a ritual performed, of a change signaled, [...] of a page being turned. [...] Leav[ing] us both unsettled and satisfied.³¹

Of course, one of the key differences between the approximately "modern" (Matisse, Breton) and "postmodern" (Ashbery, Hammond) worlds is the explosion of information available to postmoderns on a daily basis. The question of how that information affects us, and the problem of what to *do* with it, are central to both Ashbery and Hammond: "I think my work deals very directly with the time that we live in," Hammond says. "There's a surfeit of information, increasingly bodiless because of the computer, and I bring to this an interest in how meaning is constructed."³² That interest, for both Hammond and Ashbery, is not about how a singular, self-consistent author constructs meaning (with him or herself at the center), but about how meaning can be made or found through Surrealist- and Oulipo-inspired devices such as automatism, abstraction, constraint, illusionism, dream-logic, and aleatory practices. "I was looking for a surrogate for style," Hammond says. "I was trying to figure out how to make a kind of work that was decentered and variable, wandering and unpredictable even to me."³³ For both artists, this kind of decentered, style-less style was also an answer to some of the problems and excesses of Surrealism as they saw it, which put too much faith in the individual subconscious and not enough in the daylight world outside. As Hammond notes in an interview with Dreishpoon:

The Surrealists had too much respect for their own subconscious. They had a privileged hierarchy of signs—you know, shit, fire, etc. I'm really interested in seeing these new things out in the world, as collaboration. I've always worked with found information, with elements originating in the world. [...] And I actually believe that leaving that space is what ends up allowing the viewer to enter when the piece is done. It's not only about me.³⁴

As critics following Perloff have argued, this interest in how meaning is constructed becomes a major preoccupation not only for Hammond and Ashbery but also, of necessity, for their readers and viewers, who must increasingly act as collaborators in their hypertextual environments, operators in the many gaps and spaces left open by the work.

The issue of collaboration, foregrounded in the title of Hammond's work, is important to consider from the position of reader response and also in relation to its two named producers. An immediately obvious fact about the Hammond–Ashbery collaboration is that the two did not work together in the same way as other well-known New York collaborators (think of Frank O'Hara and Larry Rivers huddled together over *Stones*, or James Schulyer and Ashbery passing the first lines of *Nest of Ninnies* back and forth in a car driving from East Hampton to New York).

Instead, Hammond and Ashbery's collaboration is less social than conceptual. As I have suggested in my introduction to *New York School Collaborations: The Color of Vowels*,³⁵ it makes sense to broaden our understanding of collaboration from a meeting of individuals to a meeting of minds and perceptual worlds.

While the participants in *The John Ashbery Collaboration* work at a remove from one another, that distance does not lessen but shapes the works' particular kind of collaborative effect. *The John Ashbery Collaboration* is less concerned with the way individual personalities manifest themselves (through the kinds of friendships, rivalries, and social negotiations traced in works such as Andrew Epstein's *Beautiful Enemies*³⁶) than with the way one partner's images and impulses, the vast and ephemeral material of an artistic voice or vision, might impinge on another. In fact, both Ashbery's and Hammond's aesthetics are preoccupied with acts of "collaboration at a distance" or "translation," as Jenni Quilter usefully defines the process. Ashbery, of course, has worked for decades as a language translator, but of equal importance is his translation work, in Quilter's words, "between perceptual modes of art."³⁷ Such a perspective takes into consideration the way Ashbery's work as an art critic, music aficionado, film enthusiast, and collector in general has informed his poetic output through multiple acts of translating and *collaging* modes of artistic intelligence. In examining such "translations," interpreters need to ask how artists recombine not only materials but also modes of representation into new formal patterns and "original" compositions.

Arranging the cabinet of curios

David Herd: "Do you think there is any sense in which your poetry is engaged in the act of collecting?"³⁸

John Ashbery: "Yes. I think it is a kind of cabinet of curios."

Both Hammond and Ashbery are inveterate collectors of curios: objects, images, bits of language, and, as the basis for this project, *titles*. Titles (of books, paintings, poems, and people) are an essential form of categorization, one of the collector's chief occupations. At the time Hammond began *The John Ashbery Collaboration*, Ashbery was working on *And the Stars Were Shining*, a collection of mostly short lyrics which borrows its title (*E lucevan le stelle*) from the first line of a famous aria in Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* (1900), and which John Emil Vincent argues³⁹ is very much about the process and meaning of titling, naming and, I would add, *collecting*. A key poem in the volume, "Title Search," is an inventory of forty-five possible book titles, a catalogue of samples not unlike the forty-four titles Ashbery supplied for Hammond. Indeed, while none of the Hammond titles appears in "Title Search," Ashbery does sneak a few back into his book in the eponymously titled long poem "And the Stars Were Shining."⁴⁰ The present article will turn to this

poem and volume after first considering Hammond as a collector and collagist.

As explained above, Hammond has produced decades of work by recombining her compendium of 276 images gathered from diverse sources, including the artist's collection of nineteenth-century single-volume encyclopedias (with Ashberian titles such as *The Encyclopedia of Needlework*, *Phrenology: A Practice Guide to Your Head*, *Everybody's Marionette Book*, and *The Young Folks' Encyclopedia of Common Things*). Many of Hammond's early paintings (e.g. *Untitled 179, 124, 74, 118, 26, 247, 64, 136, 260, 275, 200, 183, 56, 244, 105, 62, 237*) (figure 2) are titled simply by listing the accession numbers, as it were, for each collaged image from her curated inventory. In this work, Hammond uses a style of Surrealist collage recalling Max Ernst's "wordless novels" (such as his five-volume *Une Semaine de bonté*, 1934), in which a series of found images (in Ernst, nineteenth-century engraved illustrations) is combined into surreal, loosely associated exhibits. Hammond's collage, recalling *Une Semaine de bonté's* second book focused on images of water, is an uncanny collection of heads and masks (including her own, collaged onto an Esther Williams swimsuit body) that emerge from an eerie swimming pool, calling out and recalling their own catalogued names (183, 26, 56 etc.). The figures appear to be in search of themselves or each other, or perhaps playing a game of Marco Polo? This pre-*The John Ashbery Collaboration* work may be seen as a precursor to the Ashbery-titled *Wonderful You* series where Hammond collages her head onto a series of disparate bodies (figure 3). Both inviting and eschewing autobiographical disclosure or self-naming, Jane appears in this series of three paintings as Buddha, Jesus Christ, Santa Claus, Superman, a satyr, Mickey Mouse, St Sebastian, a jack-in-the-box, Spanish Conquistador, and others. This gesture of ironic disclosure will be familiar to Ashbery readers, who are frequently offered an autobiographical glimpse—promised self-naming, in one line, only to have it whisked it away in the next, "as though to protect/What it advertises").⁴¹ These assemblies of multiple Janes, provocatively displayed on house-shaped canvases, are one among many of Hammond's scrapbook-like collections. In other works, Hammond visualizes and thematizes "the collection" with assemblies of butterflies, bulletin boards, tattoos, scrapbooks, star maps, leaves, Shanghai costumes, and Chinese charms.⁴² Much of her recent work is developed from an ever-growing collection of vernacular photography:

I go to flea markets and fairs and dealers now. I collect photographs madly. I can't wait to get up in the morning and go. Prowling through book fairs is another thing I love. I don't know. I guess I am like a collector, or like a trapper.⁴³

Ashbery has similarly been a lifelong collector of books, toys, art, paper, music, movies, furnishings, and bric-a-brac of all sorts: the more unique and previously uncollected, the better.



Figure 2. Jane Hammond, *Untitled* (179, 124, 74, 118, 26, 247, 64, 136, 260, 275, 200, 183, 56, 244, 105, 62, 237), 1992. Oil on canvas with metal leaf. 178 × 218.5 centimeters. Courtesy: Collection of the Cincinnati Museum of Art.



Figure 3. Jane Hammond, *Wonderful You*, 1995. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 207 × 208 centimeters overall (three panels). Courtesy: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, Gift of Steven Scott.

I collect a lot of things, including the vomit bags from airplanes; unused. [...] I did it because I was trying to have something that nobody else collected. I already had this idea a number of years ago when I started collecting aquarium ornaments: chests of treasure, and sunken ships, and pagodas. Then I discovered shortly afterwards that these had become the latest collectible.⁴⁴

Ashbery's multifaceted interest in collection—displayed most prominently in his homes, his collages, and, of course, his “cabinet of curios” poetry—has become an area of considerable academic interest in the last decade. Beginning with a special issue of the journal *Rain Taxi* (2008) that gathered a dozen essays focused on the significance of Ashbery's “domestic environments” (in Hudson and Manhattan), and continuing with the 2013 Loretta Howard Gallery show *John Ashbery Collects: Poet among Things*, the founding of the Ashbery Home School in 2014, and, most recently, the remarkable Yale University Digital Humanities Laboratory's project *John Ashbery's Nest*, critics and enthusiasts have been exploring the congruence between Ashbery's fascination with collectible objects and his bricolage poetry.⁴⁵

For sociologist Niaholai Aristides, a collection is “an obsession organized.”⁴⁶ Collectors, as distinct from accumulators, or in their worst shading “hoarders,” are distinguished by their selective faculties and desire to create something “perfect” in its completion or totality. Collectors are interested in order and arrangement, in systematizing and highlighting the aesthetic or ideal, versus utilitarian, value of objects. Collectors do not use the coins or stamps in their collections; they do not degrade them by putting them into circulation. Rather, they acquire, organize, and display these objects for their intrinsic, serial, *ideal* value. Aristides's choice of the word “obsession” also directs us to another dimension of collecting that, Jean Baudrillard argues, is “profoundly related to subjectivity.”⁴⁷ The “loved objects” that we collect, Baudrillard maintains, express the deeply rooted passion of *personal possession*. Our possessions and desire *for* possession define us: they are a “system,” in Baudrillard's terms, by which “the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm.”⁴⁸ Indeed, in an era where acquisition has become the definitive ideology, our objects have become “the consolation of consolations, an everyday myth capable of absorbing all our anxieties [...]”⁴⁹

These preoccupations map well onto what might be called a poetics of collection in Ashbery and Hammond in the sense that, as Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel put it, collecting is “a form of play with classification”⁵⁰ and at the same time a game of self-fashioning. In their work on “Play and Aesthetics in Collecting,” Danet and Katriel explore the congruencies between childhood play and adult collecting, which they describe as “a form of private leisure, outside the bounds of role obligation and the serious business of everyday life, in which the individual is free to develop an idiosyncratic,

symbolic world.”⁵¹ They note the way that play and collecting both feature contest and competition, the presence of chance, and the element of fantasy or make-believe—all components relevant to Ashbery's and Hammond's work as well. It may be useful, then, to think of each new poem or painting—and this seems particularly true of *The John Ashbery Collaboration*—as a game of collection, recombination, and reclassification. In his *ars poetica* “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name,” Ashbery describes this sport as the game of “what to put in your poem-painting”: “Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium./ Names of boys you once knew and their sleds [...]”⁵² This much anthologized poem is a model enactment of Ashbery's *what-to-use* and *how-to-use-it* game, which begins by setting out the rules: “You can't say it that way any more,” and continues by testing out potential, new ways of saying it: “Suddenly the street was/Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments./ Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head/Locked into mine.”⁵³ Like so many of Ashbery's poems, “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name” (half-titled, appropriately, after a children's game-song) plays with describing its own unfolding process, narrating its experience of poetic experience:

[...] Something

Ought to be written about how this affects

You when you write poetry:

The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind

Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate

Something between breaths [...].⁵⁴

The almost-surreal “Rousseau-like foliage,” invoking as it does another Surrealist precursor, should also remind us of the games Ashbery is playing with the movement. Recalling his earlier comments about the need to “correct” or update its methods, “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name” reminds us that one also cannot “say” or *play* the Surrealist game “that way anymore.”

When talking about Surrealism with David Herd, Ashbery notes that the mode was “most effective as it became diluted and appeared in more unexpected places.”⁵⁵ The works of Ashbery and Hammond are surely some of those unexpected places, given their stated ambiguity. The way that both artists play the game of *poiesis* (in its primary sense of “making form”) is through a reimagined set of procedures borrowed from those primary game-players, the Surrealists. If we uncouple Surrealism from its grander Bretonian claims of being “the most radically liberating critique of reason of the century,”⁵⁶ what Neo-surrealists are left with is a more serviceable set of techniques and games: automatism, exquisite corpse, frottage, fumage, chain poems, and collaborations of all kinds. Used by the Surrealists to “disorder the senses” and find a higher reality

beyond reality, these games became most useful for Neo-surrealists such as Ashbery and Hammond for doing that thing which was anathema to Breton: making art.

The collection offers us a paradigm of perfection, for this is where the passionate enterprise of possession can achieve its ambitions, within a space where the everyday prose of the object-world modulates into poetry, to institute an unconscious and triumphant discourse.⁵⁷

While neither Ashbery nor Hammond would likely see their practices as a “paradigm of perfection,” both are nonetheless dedicated to the game of arranging the “everyday prose” objects of their ever-growing collections into something we could call poetry. Ashbery’s “Ghost Riders of the Moon,” from *And the Stars Were Shining*, is a good place to start examining how his poetry is both a showcase and a meditation on the process of collection and curation:

[...] Such

objects as my endurance picks out
like a searchlight have gone the extra mile
too, like schoolchildren, and are seated now
in attentive rows, waiting trimly for these words to flood
distraught corners of silences. We collected
them after all for their unique
indifference to each other and to the circus
that houses us all, and for their collectability—
that, and their tendency to fall apart.⁵⁸

After collecting “Such/Objects as my endurance picks out,” (vomit bags? aquarium ornaments? bats, butterflies, Balinese shadow-puppets?), the curator’s job is to surmount their “unique indifference” and order them, “like schoolchildren [...] in attentive rows.” The game (the image of dutiful schoolchildren suggests it is a lighthearted, cheerful one) is less to keep them from falling apart than to encourage them to “fall together,” as it were, making poems (“words to flood/distraught corners of silences”) or paintings, collections that suggests something more than the sum of their collected parts. These assemblies will not be fixed monuments, but rather contingent “place[s] for the genuine.”⁵⁹

“Ghost Riders” begins with a demonstration of the art-making procedure on which it reflects, as a searchlight is shone on a collection of toiletry items (comb, toothbrush, razor), which are transformed in a Surrealist moment that recalls René Magritte’s famous *Les valeurs personnelles* (1952):

Today I would leave it just as it is.
The pocket comb—“dirty as a comb,” the French say,
yet not so dirty, surely not in the spiritual sense
some intuit; the razor, lying at an angle
to the erect toothbrush, like an alligator stalking
a *bayadère*, the singular effect of all things
being themselves, that is, stark mad [...].⁶⁰

While Magritte’s painting uses hypertrophy to affect the image, transforming his objects (a comb, shaving brush, bar of soap, etc.) by enlarging their size, Ashbery works both on the plane of the image and of language itself. He not only transforms the razor into a stalking alligator and the toothbrush into a helpless dancing girl but also creates a kind of Surrealism of idiom with his digression on the French slang (“dirty as a comb”) and his odd specificity in choosing *bayadère* (a Hindu dancing girl, in particular one at a southern Indian temple). Each of these moves distracts us from, rather than immerses us in, the image at hand and calls for a kind of linguistic extension to what might otherwise be a typical Surrealist imagism. Readers are asked to divert their attention from dreamlike images and “chance encounters” to a kind of lexical Surrealism that surprises “in more unexpected places,” in the signifiers rather than the signified.

Ashbery often makes this unpredictable move away from image and towards language when playing with two Surrealist staples: space and time. Instead of the fantastical places conjured by a Salvador Dalí or Ernst, Ashbery creates spaces of lexical or grammatical mystery or complexity, more in line with de Chirico’s illusionism:

Above the architecture were
tinselled outcroppings, a space between.
In short, it was marvelous, the young master was mad to
have us,
but until such time as the thorny legal angles
can be worked out, joy must stay
imprisoned in the air around us, like humidity.⁶¹

Here time, space, and affect merge into an amorphous, humid environment. “Architecture” (of some unspecified kind), “tinselled outcroppings” (of some unnamed sort), and “thorny legal angles” (on some unstipulated matter) all create a linguistic “space between” specificity and generality, an unmappable location that only language could make. Unlike the dreamy, elongated spaces of Dalí that seem to invite the subconscious, Ashbery’s spaces are “compressed” by grammar into an uncertain “Tom Tiddler’s Ground” (another Hammond title), as he puts it in *And the Stars Were Shining*:

Oh, sure,
hedgerows are in it too, and the doves there and
insects
and treed raccoons that eye one with frank disapproval:
“You unmitigated disaster, you!” I was pleased to
discover
one could flatten or otherwise compress it, its Tom
Tiddler’s ground having induced only a subcoma, a place
where grown men drink screwdrivers and giggle at the
melee
that would certainly have resulted if someone, some
prince regent or sheriff,
hadn’t been in charge, while the day moped
and opened the fan of its grievances, harassment

being the only one that stands out in the blur now,
after such distance.⁶²

“Tom Tiddler’s ground” is another game, an ancient version of “King of the Castle,” where one player struggles to occupy a space (atop a pile of stones or a small hill, for example) until another pushes them out of place so that he or she can occupy it momentarily. The phrase has thus become “a euphemism for having an uncertain status,” and well describes not only the amorphous setting of *And the Stars Are Shining* but also the reader’s experience of much of Ashbery’s poetry. The fun of this game—for reader and author—is not so much to imagine or capture a fantastical, surreal place (with doves, insects, and treed raccoons or grown men drinking screwdrivers and giggling), but to keep up with the momentum of change, to follow a line’s or thought’s development, as one stands out, momentarily, in the blur:

So bring the scenery with you.

Midwife to gargoyles, as if all or something
were appropriate, you circle the time inside you,
plant an asterisk next to a kiss,
and it was going to be okay again, and the love
of which much was made settles closer, is a paw
against a wrist. Hasn’t finished yet,

though the bread-and-butter machine continues to churn
out

faxes, each grisette has something different
about her forehead, is as a poinsettia
in the breeze of Rockefeller Center.⁶³

The faxes (reminiscent of the one Ashbery sent Hammond—especially since they issue from a “bread and butter machine” of the poet’s mind)—offer titles, names, places, or identities for reader and writer to inhabit (man drinking screwdriver? midwife to gargoyles?), momentary at least, though with conviction, “as if all or something/were appropriate,” until the next scenery change:

We sure live in a bizarre and furious
galaxy, but now it’s up to us to make it
into an environment for maps to sidle up to,
as trustingly as leeches. Heck, put *us*
on the map, while you’re at it.⁶⁴

Ashbery and Hammond both make environments (poems, paintings, collages) that may be usefully seen as Neo-surrealist games. These games put *us* on the map together: as players and game-masters, audiences and authors. One of the great contributions of the Surrealists, beyond their art and manifestos, was the creation of dozens of language and visual games, “techniques of surprise and methodologies of the fantastic,” writes Mel Gooding, who edited the first *Book of Surrealist Games*.⁶⁵ These games almost always involved collaboration, the making of texts (such as the exquisite corpse) between multiple players. Indeed, an important part of Surrealist

games is the slippage between player (reader) and game-master (author), such that readers have considerable space to become authors, to “sidle up” to the exhibits with their own maps. Authors, likewise, move in and out of “control” as they collect pieces for the work, often found by accident, chance, or in *The John Ashbery Collaboration* by chance appointment, and as those pieces develop through their own momentum.

This article concludes, then, by sidling up to and playing a couple of pieces, one from Hammond’s *The John Ashbery Collaboration* and one from Ashbery’s coincident collection *And the Stars Are Shining*. The two might be taken as irregular companion pieces: both are personal collections, with Ashbery’s “Title Search” working as a kind of mirror for the list of titles behind Hammond’s *The John Ashbery Collaboration*.

Irregular plurals

Hammond completed five different works based on Ashbery’s title “Irregular Plural.” Each book-shaped canvas presents a series of “irregular” or odd visual correspondences, with facing pages displaying objects that might be grouped in various sets. *Irregular Plural* (1995), for example, is an open book of matching fans, face nets and frogs, pillows and shadow puppets, needlework and nests. The images are all drawn from Hammond’s 276-item store and as such we might think of each canvas/book as a collector’s catalogue or guidebook. “I didn’t want to do something self-reflexive about grammar or language,” Hammond says about the *Irregular Plural* series.⁶⁶ And yet, it is hard not to read these works as a visual grammar or language of classification. The dynamic of difference and sameness creates a game for viewers who must puzzle out the rules of arrangement, which things belong to which irregular set. *Irregular Plural* #5 (1999) (figure 4), for example, juxtaposes the bald heads of Mahatma Gandhi (left page) and Pablo Picasso (right page), a child’s dollhouse with an architect’s model house, a three-word text (“SIBERIAN CHAIN ESCAPE”) with another three-word text (“EGYPTIAN WATER BOX”)—but, as this last pair suggests, the matching game also gets more complicated and ambiguous. Besides the texts’ three-word structure, we might ask, are there further connections between SIBERIAN and EGYPTIAN? CHAIN and WATER? ESCAPE and BOX? The more we look, the more possible correspondences appear: does the birdhouse pagoda belong with one of the other houses or with the bird? (or the duck?) What about the camera housing or stick house (or is that an animal trap?). Does the twisted rope (left page) belong with knotted string? with the drawing of a looped rope? or with the wishbone that shares its shape? Repeated images that thematize illusion and games: masks, veils, puppets, dice, cameras, and television sets—often represented in ways that create visual uncertainty—add to the difficulty and fun of each irregular puzzle. And the game continues to



Figure 4. Jane Hammond, *Irregular Plural*, 1999. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 185.5 × 221 centimeters. Courtesy: Private collection.

expand the more we look at Hammond's work. While her collection of images remains constant, the meaning of singular images shifts from one composition to another, depending on their placement. Throughout her oeuvre we find new parallels and plurals, as painter and viewer reshuffle the 276 playing pieces.

This game of recombination may also be seen as an inquiry into cognitive metaphors and the aesthetics of representation.

I'm interested in how things are represented, a Chinese drawing of a rabbit versus a rabbit ashtray from *Popular Mechanics*. This title got me into juxtaposing versions of things: these nautical knots with those veterinarian sutures; this Mehndi hand with that magician's glove. And in the process, something is said about the nature of representation and how an image can be freighted with the feeling of the culture it comes from.⁶⁷

In this sense, the work is very much what Hammond repudiates: a "self-reflexive," philosophical inquiry into "grammar or language." Her repudiation, in fact, is quite similar to Ashbery's unwillingness to see his own work as "philosophical." When asked by Herd whether "that term [philosophical] seem[s] appropriate," Ashbery replies:

No. I took a beginning course in philosophy and did miserably in it. I've never been able to understand the language of philosophy. The professor was always stressing the importance of a clear and distinct idea, and I never could determine what that was. I suppose I'm a kind of bricoleur as far as philosophy goes.⁶⁸

Philosophy, ideas, and representations; titles and voices; Mehndi hands, magician's gloves, and vomit bags are all *pieces* Ashbery and Hammond collect, raw materials for construction. Baudrillard argues—and I think this makes particular sense with regards to Ashbery's and Hammond's worlds—that all the pieces of a collection are, in a sense, equivalent: "Typically, a collector will refer to a 'lovely piece', rather than a lovely carving. Once the object stops being defined by its function, its meaning is entirely up to the subject."⁶⁹ This is surely one of the reasons why Ashbery is hesitant to privilege philosophy or "clear and distinct ideas." There is no philosophical principle underlying the constructions; rather, there is the collector's desire to make sets, to draw together irregular plurals ("like schoolchildren [...] in attentive rows"). In this sense Hammond's and Ashbery's Surrealism is different from its modern precursor in that it is less invested in the supremacy of the subconscious than it is in the contingency of the hyper-conscious, as argued above. Hammond explains: "When I'm at the flea market I'm not seeing this thing as something that is going to trigger my powerful, authorial, supreme unconscious, which is very André Breton. I see it as a bit of collaboration."⁷⁰ Found images, she explains, are useful because they do not come from her, because they lead *out* instead of in: "I only make paintings because they come to me unsolicited, [...] I don't get ideas from the images, I get ideas in the images."⁷¹ Found images are Hammond's building blocks, in the same way that found voices are often Ashbery's: "Lots of my poems have their origin in what I hear people saying in the street in New York, in the American vernacular, which I guess is what American is."⁷²

The *Irregular Plural* paintings, then, present both a literal catalogue of some of Hammond's collected images and a do-it-yourself game that encourages viewers to make their own irregular matches and collections. We might, for example, group items using an East/West schema, or sort them into science/art, word/image, material/immaterial categories. Ashbery takes up a similar game in *And the Stars Were Shining* where he plays with some of his own titles, with images and forms discovered in and with Hammond, and with the idea of titling itself. A useful place to begin in turning to Ashbery's collecting is with the poem that critic John Emil Vincent uses to title his chapter on *And the Stars Were Shining* in *John Ashbery and You*: "Title Search."

Like Ashbery's many list poems, "Title Search" is an irregular collection, a gathering of forty-five textual objects under the rubric of the "title." At the same time, it is a kind of game—though its rules, like the rules of most Ashbery poems, remain unstated. We may assume, as Vincent does in his approach, that the implied author is the player of this game, and that the challenge is to find an appropriate title "for a book of poems—perhaps this book of poems."⁷³ Readers, in this case, are spectators to the poet's recreation:

The poem starts as if the poet had been flipping through a rolodex of comically flawed and nonsensical titles, "Voices of Spring. Vienna Bonbons./Morning Papers. Visiting Firemen. Mourning Polka," finally hitting on "Nelly and All" in the first stanza's penultimate line.⁷⁴

Another (or concurrent) way of playing the game is to assume that the *reader* is the player. Readers are induced to perform a "title search," as one would with a piece of property (in this case, a piece of poetry), attempting to ascertain the property's history, legal ownership, and any "claims" there may be on it. "Title," then, is connected with ownership and identity, and the game is to discover what one can about the owner/author *from his titles*. Vincent also plays this game of interpretation with commendable ingenuity, beginning with his privileging of the title "Nelly and All" that "intimates, in a kind of not difficult to crack code, that the poems [of the to-be-titled collection, property, owner] might be effeminate or particularly 'gay' in theme and style."⁷⁵ Vincent continues the moves of his close reading/title search, observing that from the "pinacle of 'coming out'"

the poem recedes into a kind of humility ("Elm Street and After. The Little Red Church"), and then past the humble to the humiliatingly absurd or just plain humiliatingly comic: "I'll Eat a Mexican. The Heritage of Froth." Finally, it offers this absurdity as a new house for the newly exposed poet, that is, the poet who has come out, finishing the fourth stanza with "Memoirs of a Hermit Crab." The memoirs of such a crab would certainly reference its nude searches for new shells.⁷⁶

Reading the titles as a "code to be cracked," one that will eventually lead to a name or identity (such as "gay poet") at first seems like a valid way of playing the "Title Search" game. It is, indeed, a strategy that seems to be licensed by Ashbery who hints that he will be dropping clues throughout the volume ("Yet I think a clue is back here/behind the sofa, where the last bunnies whimper/and press together"),⁷⁷ and sometimes seems to pledge that "all the riddles come undone."⁷⁸ Here's another clue from twelfth section of *And the Stars Are Shining*, in a passage that begins with another dropped title from Hammond's list:

[...] surrounded by buddies
taking a breather, it was always thus with you,
you who come close enough to me:
Oh, you've often found
clues in the garden where the hornets
and the robins make their nests;
clues on the stairway, in the vestry
and the garage with its enormous drums.⁷⁹

These "clues," including the hidden Hammond titles, pile up throughout the volume, suggesting perhaps the revelation of a final meaning or name. At the same time, readers of Ashbery know that it has been "always thus" in his work, which frequently initiates disclosure at the same time that it withdraws:

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,
At incredible speed, traveling day and night,
Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through
narrow passes.
But will he know where to find you,
Recognize you when he sees you,
Give you the thing he has for you?⁸⁰

In this passage from "At North Farm," and in so many like it, the "thing" never arrives. The clues "traveling furiously toward you," or hiding behind the sofa, or the curtain just lead to more uncertainty, or to comic deflation, as in this ironic unveiling from *And the Stars Were Shining*:

[...] All ribbons parted
on the veil of musicks, wherein
unwitting orangutans gambled for socks,

and the tasseled enemy was routed.
Up in one corner a plaid puff of smoke
warned mere pleasures away. [...] ⁸¹

This is a moment repeated in numerous variations throughout Ashbery's oeuvre: readerly expectations of some momentous revelation ("All ribbons parted/on the veil of musicks") are rebuffed or answered ironically or absurdly ("unwitting orangutans gambled for socks"). Any other answer would be "mere pleasure"—the too easy pleasure of *expected* gratification. Instead, Ashbery offers the always anticipated but the never captured object. This is not unlike the collector's final, always-

distant dream-object: the one that will *complete* the collection. But this object's desirability is directly linked to its impossibility, its ever elusiveness. Finding that final object is both dream and nightmare, since possessing this last piece would put an end to the game of collection. The principal elusive object in Ashbery's poetry is the subject himself: the name or title that guarantees the collection—"Ashbery," the subject of the "title search."

And the Stars are Shining highlights the search for names, titles, and "the author himself," and so reads as "still sharply personal poetry,"⁸² though we must also concede that the "personal" (Ashbery's names, titles, and selves) insistently disappear in a "puff of smoke." While Vincent gets considerable mileage out of analyzing the proffered titles in "Title Search," he also notes that none becomes the actual title of *And the Stars Were Shining*, or indeed sounds anything like the title of this or any Ashbery volume. Instead of arriving at a "correct" title, the poem/search is "illustrative of titling, that is, of putting things up front."⁸³ What the poem says about titling, Vincent suggests, is that while we habitually "put things up front" (such as by "coming out") to encapsulate or describe ourselves and our properties, what really matters are the *things*—in the case of *And the Stars Were Shining* and *The John Ashbery Collaboration*, the pieces, poems, and canvases—that make up our collections.

Another way of putting this argument is suggested by Marjorie Perloff's discussion of "Pound, Duchamp, and the Nominalist Ethos."⁸⁴ Nominalism is a philosophical position that "denies the existence of abstract objects and universals" and

holds that all that really exists are particular, usually physical objects, and that properties, numbers, and sets (for instance) are not further things in the world, but merely features of our way of thinking or speaking about things that do exist.⁸⁵

Perloff's essay compares Pound's insistence on proper names (his "hyper-naming project," as she puts it, in *The Cantos* and elsewhere) with "Duchamp's lexicon," in which "each word, number, or material objects bears a distinct name—a name not to be confused with any other and pointing to no universal concept outside itself."⁸⁶ Similarly, I would suggest, Ashbery and Hammond are equally suspicious of universals or abstract concepts that join, rationalize, or unify the particulars of their work. Thus "Title Search" ends in failure, had we or "Ashbery" hoped to get to the *right* (universal) title. But it ends in a kind of success if we give up on universals and are content simply to play along with the "curious many-colored toys" the poem offers.

Contrary to this nominalist ethos, many of the early Surrealists would have thought of art-making as an idealist enterprise. Breton saw it as a work of revelation of a supreme idea: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak."⁸⁷

Ashbery and Hammond make more modest claims. While Bretonian Surrealism dreams of revolutionizing the world on the strength of imagination, Ashbery's and Hammond's Neo-surrealism is content with the strangeness of the world as it stands. "The idea of having the world broken down into realism and *sur*-realism is a false model," Hammond comments in a personal interview, "the world is a crazy enough place in itself." Their goal as artists is to document and collect, arrange and display, making "a fiction that's woven of facts," as Hammond says of her work.⁸⁸

Beyond all the multicolored toys in their collections, there is one more item, too often neglected by the Surrealists in their self-absorption, the final unassuming surprise: *you*. You are needed, Ashbery's and Hammond's work keeps saying, to collect and arrange the pieces, to fulfill the waiting picture. As Ashbery puts it in *And the Stars Were Shining*'s penultimate section:

Still, the hothouse beckons.
I've told you before how afraid this makes me,
but I think we can handle it together,
and this is as good a place as any
to unseal my final surprise: you, as you go,
diffident, indifferent, but with the sky for an awning
for as many days as it pleases it to cover you.⁸⁹

Ashbery's and Hammond's work is hospitable to the other. It acknowledges and indeed invites readers and viewers (the second-person, "you") in a way that feels quite different from the shock-and-awe tactics of the Surrealists. Commenting on the Abstract Expressionists, the Surrealist-inspired generation of painters before Hammond, Meyer Schapiro noted, "It wasn't automatism that the Americans learned from the Surrealists, but how to be heroic."⁹⁰ Like other New York artists of their generation, Hammond and Ashbery responded to this heroism with a combination of diffidence and good humor, a pleasure in the weirdness not only of the surreal but also of the real.

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NOTES

1— John Ashbery, "Introduction," in *Jane Hammond: The John Ashbery Collaboration, 1993–2001* (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary

- Art, 2001), 9. To view Hammond's paintings, visit her website at janehammondartist.com.
- 2– Georgio De Chirico, "Manuscript from the Collection of Paul Eluard," in *Hebdomeros: With Monsieur Dudron's Adventure and Other Metaphysical Writing* (New York: Exact Change, 1992), 176–204, at 185–86.
- 3– John Ashbery, "The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism," in *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1957–1987*, ed. David Bergman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 5–8, at 8.
- 4– William Rubin's "Toward a Critical Framework," *Artforum* 5, (1966): 36–56, proposes "two poles of Surrealist painting—the automatist-abstract and the academic-illusionist— [which] correspond roughly to the Freudian twin props of Surrealist theory—automatism and dreams" (36). For Rubin, de Chirico's "immense formative influence" (41) on Surrealism is related to the academic-illusionist pole. Suarez-Toste's study of Elizabeth Bishop's relationship to Surrealism (and her interests in de Chirico) further emphasizes the importance of dreams by expanding the terminology to the "academic-illusionist-oneiric" (Ernesto Suarez-Toste, "Une machine a coudre Manuelle: Elizabeth Bishop's 'everyday surrealism,'" *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 33, no. 2 (Jun 2000): 143–160, at 144.
- 5– Georgio De Chirico, "On Metaphysical Art," *Metaphysical Art: The de Chirico Journals*, nos. 14/16 (2016): 37–39, at 37, <http://www.fondazionechirico.org/wp-content/uploads/5.-METAPYSICAL-ART-n.14-16-2016-G.deChirico-On-Metaphysical-Art-37-39-.pdf>. (accessed on 3 February 2018).
- 6– Christina Britzolakis, "Conversation among the Ruins: Plath and de Chirico," in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, ed. Kathleen Connors and Salley Bayley (New York: Oxford, 2007), 167–84, at 169.
- 7– Ibid.
- 8– De Chirico, "On Metaphysical Art," 39.
- 9– Ibid., 40.
- 10– André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 26.
- 11– John Ashbery, "In the Surrealist Tradition," in Bergman, *Reported Sightings*, 3–4, at 4.
- 12– Ibid.
- 13– De Chirico emphasizes that "a continuous control is needed of our thoughts and the images that appear in our mind. [...] Thomas de Quincey's methods do not interest us"; de Chirico, "On Metaphysical Art," 37.
- 14– John Ashbery, "Heritage," in Bergman, *Reported Sightings*, 5–6.
- 15– Ibid., 7.
- 16– Jane Hammond, interview with the author, November 18, 2010.
- 17– Ibid.
- 18– John Ashbery, "Space and Dream," in Bergman, *Reported Sightings*, 11.
- 19– Ashbery, "Introduction," in *Jane Hammond*, 9.
- 20– David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 111. For more examples and commentary on the "New York School myth of instant creation," see Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 88–90.
- 21– Hammond, interview with the author (see note 15).
- 22– Jane Hammond, email to the author, October 7, 2013.
- 23– André Breton, "What is Surrealism?" Generation-Online, www.generation-online.org/c/fcsurrealism2.htm (accessed on 17 July 2019).
- 24– Ibid.
- 25– Quoted in Jacques Roubaud, "Introduction: The Oulipo and Combinatorial Art," in *The Oulipo Compendium*, ed. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas, 1998), 37–44, at 41.
- 26– Ibid.
- 27– "Red Studio," Museum of Modern Art, Gallery label, www.moma.org/collection/works/78389?locale=en (accessed on March 12, 2019).
- 28– John Ashbery, "Untitled Essay from Exhibition," September 6, 1990, janehammondartist.com/untitled/ (accessed on November 20, 2018).
- 29– Hilarie Sheets, "Down the Rabbit Hole of Photography," *ARTnews* (February 2013): 74–79, janehammondartist.com/artnews-2013-hilarie-m-sheets/ (accessed on November 16, 2018).
- 30– Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 10.
- 31– Ashbery, "Untitled Essay from Exhibition."
- 32– Nancy Princenthal, "Reading between the Lines: Works on Paper by Jane Hammond," in *Jane Hammond: Paperwork*, ed. Marianne Doezema (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 1–11, at 2.
- 33– Ibid., 1.
- 34– Douglas Dreishpoon, "Interview with Jane Hammond," in Doezema, *Jane Hammond: Paperwork*, 23–31, at 25.
- 35– Mark Silverberg, "Introduction: New York School Collaborations and The Coronation Murder Mystery" in *New York School Collaborations: The Color of Vowels*, ed. Mark Silverberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–10, at 2–4.
- 36– Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 37– Jenni Quilter, "'We Even Imagined the Posters': Collaborations between John Ashbery, Harry Mathews and Trevor Winkfield," *Word & Image* 25, no. 2 (2009): 192–209, at 207, doi:10.1080/02666280802425966.
- 38– David Herd, "In Conversation with John Ashbery," *PN Review* 21, no. 1 (1994): 32–37, at 36.
- 39– John Emil Vincent, "Title Search," John Ashbery and You: His Later Books (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 93–113.
- 40– For example, hiding in the center of the poem, in Part VI, readers find: "So bring the scenery with you./Midwife to gargoyles, as if all or something/were appropriate, you circle the time inside you [...] though the bread-and-butter machine continues to churn out/faxes [...]" (83). And later: "The bug-black German/heels and back areas, the long tilted/cloaks for sale [...]" (85) or "And the store models are free/for the asking [...]" (89). The titles Ashbery faxed to Hammond include *Midwife to Gargoyles*, *Bread and Butter Machine*, *Long Black German Heels and Back Areas*, and *Sore Models*. John Ashbery, "And the Stars Were Shining," *And the Stars Were Shining* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 76–100.
- 41– John Ashbery, "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror," in *The Collected Poems 1956–1987*, ed. Mark Ford (New York: Library of America, Literary Classics of the United States, 2008), 474–87, at 474.
- 42– Many of these works can be viewed on Hammond's website (see note 1). For butterfly collections, see the *All Souls* butterfly maps paintings; bulletin boards (*Gumdrops*, 2004–05; and *Water Tulip*, 2014); tattoos (*Tabula Rosa*, 2001); scrapbooks and notebooks (*Rebus Paintings*, 2002–03); star maps (various works, 2003–06); leaves (*Fallen*, 2008); *Shanghai Costumes* (2002–03); and *Chinese Charms* (2003).
- 43– Dreishpoon, "Interview with Jane Hammond," 25.
- 44– Herd, "In Conversation with John Ashbery," 36–37.
- 45– *A Dream of This Room: A Created Spaces Portfolio of Works on John Ashbery's Textual and Domestic Environments*, ed. Micaela Morrissette, <http://www.raintaxi.com/literary-features/john-ashbery-created-spaces/> (accessed October 18, 2018); *John Ashbery Collects: Poet among Things* (New York: Loretta Howard Gallery, 2013); Ashbery Home School, <http://www.thehomeschool.org/>; John Ashbery's Nest, <http://vr.ashberyhouse.yale.edu/> (accessed April 24, 2019).
- 46– Niaholai Aristides, "Calm and Uncollected," *American Scholar* 57, no. 3 (1988): 327–36, at 330.
- 47– Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting," in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion, 1994), 7–25, at 7.
- 48– Ibid.
- 49– Ibid., 17.
- 50– Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, "No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting," in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (New York: Routledge, 1994), 220–39, at 222.
- 51– Ibid.

- 52– Ashbery, *Collected Poems 1956–1987*, 519.
- 53– Ibid.
- 54– Ibid., 519–20.
- 55– Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery,” 34.
- 56– Mel Gooding, *A Book of Surrealist Games*, compiled by Alastair Brotchie (Boston: Shambhala Redstone, 1995), 51.
- 57– Baudrillard, “System of Collecting,” 8.
- 58– Ibid., “Ghost Riders of the Moon,” *And the Stars Were Shining*, 8.
- 59– The phrase, of course, comes from Marianne Moore’s famous “Poetry”, which first appeared in *Others for 1919: An Anthology of the New Verse*, ed. Alfred Kreyborg (New York: Nicholas L Brown, 1920), 131–132, at 131.
- 60– Ibid., 8.
- 61– Ibid., “Footfalls,” 35.
- 62– Ashbery, “And The Stars Were Shining,” 76–100, at 77.
- 63– Ibid., 83.
- 64– Ibid., 94.
- 65– Gooding, *Book of Surrealist Games*, 10.
- 66– David Lehman, “Jane Hammond” [interview], *Bomb* 81 (2002): 28–35, at 33.
- 67– Ibid.
- 68– Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery,” 35.
- 69– Baudrillard, “System of Collecting,” 8.
- 70– Dreishpoon, “Interview with Jane Hammond,” 25.
- 71– Sue Scott, “Selective Visions (Jane Hammond’s Art is a Collection of Diverse Images),” *Art and Antiques* (November 1995): 92–95, at 93.
- 72– Herd, “In Conversation with John Ashbery,” 34.
- 73– John Emil Vincent, *John Ashbery and You*, 93.
- 74– Ibid., 94.
- 75– Ibid.
- 76– Ibid., 95.
- 77– Ashbery, “And The Stars Were Shining,” 76–100, at 84.
- 78– “And The Stars Were Shining,” 76–100, at 88.
- 79– Ibid., 97.
- 80– Ashbery, “At North Farm,” *Collected Poems 1956–1987*, 733.
- 81– Ashbery, “Love Scenes,” in *And the Stars Were Shining*, 9.
- 82– David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 217.
- 83– Vincent, *John Ashbery and You*, 96.
- 84– Marjorie Perloff, “The Search for ‘Prime Words’: Pound, Duchamp, and the Nominalist Ethos,” in *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 39–59.
- 85– *Oxford Paperback Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), quoted in Perloff, *Differentials*, 44.
- 86– Ibid., 45.
- 87– Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 14.
- 88– Princenthal, “Reading between the Lines,” 10.
- 89– Ashbery, “And The Stars Were Shining,” *And the Stars Were Shining*, 76–100, at 98–99.
- 90– Quoted in Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), ix.