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The Ultimate in Air

Mary Ann Caws

A Bit of History

When I first started thinking about bubbles and the blowing of them, the Chardin image of 1733 called *Soap Bubbles* swept me up entirely.



Here was a deeply concerned man leaning over a window ledge, with a natural image of a tree branch overhead, his concentration itself being a thing of beauty. Here were leaves above and beneath the window, and his intensity is doubled by the adorable child to his left, observing the magic of the bubble. The liquid, like soap, to his right, his hands gracefully placed one above the other, his hair as beautifully arranged as the picture itself. For that lock of hair, ending with a curl, is echoed by the child's hat, whose (as it were) curl reaches over, like the father's hair, imitating that natural if human item. All imitation, all joyful elegance, and all concentrated on the development of an invented vision, a bubble blower, bubble blown, and observer of the scene, of the inventive gesture. This to me is the perfect concentration of the natural and the invented to be observed: of all things, of course, a window of the familial and the art inventiveness, so that the vision of the bubbles could spread into the world beyond.

All that, of course, and here's an odd thing. I am thinking, as I often do, of a beloved artist – a painter, no, an artist, just before our time, depending on our age, or way before, but still in the twentieth if not yet the twenty-first Century, Joseph Cornell, himself addicted to a ritual, that of the Christian Science celebrations on Wednesday night, was no less concerned by the transparency, the etherality of the soap bubble. These for him, as I see it now, made visible the transparency of that other world in which he so often lived, in his world of Christian Science. Something, then, beyond our normal way of being.

I am speaking here from my own experience of Science in that sense, dating from long ago. Growing up in Wilmington, North Carolina, where Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science and author of its major work: *Science and Health and the Key to the Scriptures*, (which you can consult in any of the Christian Science Reading Rooms) spent a night or several, as announced on a plaque on Front Street, our major street. Then, when I spent a year abroad from Bryn Mawr College in Paris, my roommate was a Christian Scientist from a family that adhered to its doctrine, as did she. If you were sick, as she turned out to be sometimes, you phoned the practitioner and explained the symptoms, which were, in principle, talked away or prayed away over the phone. Luckily, there was one of those in Paris, so the phone calls were not too expensive. Elsewhere, for example, in Aspen, Colorado, where Mina Loy the poet and painter, also a Christian Scientist, went to live the last years of her life, there was not one, and so the phone calls back to New York, where the Scientist she was in touch with, was living, were ultra-dear. So her daughter Joella, because of whose early paralysis of a leg Mina had entered the Scientist flock, sometimes pretended to be that person to whom her mother needed to speak.

In Paris, the French lady with whom we lived during that year was a believer in Roman Catholicism and would have a priest come and sanctify the room from which my roommate would make the call. And still in Paris, I would play the piano at the Christian Science Church, whereas later and here in New York, I now walk by the Church here and on Wednesdays sometimes go in for a moment and read the Science material, especially because for years, I was editing the papers and files of the box artist Joseph Cornell, very much a believer. When I wanted to publish his letters to his deceased mother and brother, I had to receive permission from the Mother Church in Boston to do so. Thus, I absorbed a bit of that thinking, in which the belief in the real is modified by a kind of Other Perception, to me a kind of bubble universe.

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So let me say that the very fragility and seeing-throughness of the miraculous object – too visionary and see-through-visible to be called by such a heavy term visibly and orally as "bubble" -- takes us through much. The soap component or whatever permits the blowing out of the bubble, as in the Chardin painting, is part of the essential sensed purity of the vision. This is crucial, for in art, in life, and whatever else there might be – because, once you OPEN the AIR and the BUBBLED AIR, you have let all the genies or ghosts emerge.

Writing (in) a Bubble

Asked to write this piece for the journal *Venti* (wind, air, and I am sure, in some to be cases, Hot Air)¹, I am dealing superficially and so airily, I guess, with it all, or part. Necessarily, since any whole piece I now read as a writer reads her own writing, as being itself much of a bubble, it will happily disappear. I am seeing, even as I write, something trivially up there in the ether, taking just the time I am taking right now to reflect upon it. I have chosen to envision the air bubbles in the boxes of Joseph Cornell—that great box artist, known for imprisoning his favorite nineteenth-century ballerinas and singers, those stars of the past, in boxes he would construct rapidly and treasure, even as he gave them away. A wonderful anecdote, and this too reads as sufficiently airy to be worth re-citing (yes, I heard me write “reciting,” as if I were re-hearsing, or re-hearing with a rattlecall of the death chariot within my words and remembrance of those surrealizing early films like Satie’s and Picabia’s *Entr’acte* or the very great *Relâche*, in its humorous self-undoing, as it brings along its meta-meaning of the theatrical “closed now”) and I will end here my parenthesis.

Surely the bubbles do just that, they transport us beyond where we normally reside, and they make concrete the kind of magic in which Cornell so firmly believed, not that dark magic of the surrealists with its suspicion for him of a kind of evil presence, but a pure and evanescent world indicative of another far beyond. A healing world, so that the bubbles for him signified the healing process, the essential goodness in which he so devotedly believed... that kind of performance of magic he followed with passion.

Like smoke rings, the far other side of the natural, each mutation perhaps wishing for the same informality and purity and transparence. Something about the bubble is always about hoping, breathing, being. It is a remarkable image of perseverance. Of course, the very real danger from without is somehow reflected by the worry from within: bubbles are, by their nature, not meant to last. They contain their own

vision, but they reflect, on their surface the outside: so they are the perfect illustrations of without and transparently both: you can see one through the other.

Created as if it were a real art, that of blowing the bubbles that remain in globe shape, in many of Cornell's boxes and games and frames. There, we can play with a roll of dice or of a game-shaped ball: essentially for play, but no less for thought. For with them, we learn to roll along, to roll up and gather from below: what could be more good magic than a game in which a form infinitely fragile becomes an enduring piece, in a deeply literary and visual conundrum. It can be rolled along a wire, or tossed in the air or blown away. And the innocence of the game persists: we know how Cornell believed in white magic, and the bubble is supremely magical in its enduring or collapsing.

So the *Soap Bubble Set* of 1949-1950 is perfect in its illustration of the impermanence of the thing. The broken glass cup at the lower left from which the bubbles will arise indicate the whole life cycle of the bubble: the blowing up of the air, and the destruction of even the container of the possibility. Meditating on the outside of the globe, and that perfect circular containment is like looking at the outside of a world, complete in itself and – for that perfection, a threat to both its surroundings and its inward vision, so tightly bordered and such a refusal of anything not itself. What could thrive in this airlessness which is also complete? Like the Buckminster Fuller Dome meant to house perfection and yet life, the perfection of the bubble in the long run is its undoing -- its intense airlessness cannot express anything but itself, its own hemming in of existence. The irony of Cornell's *Pharmacy Series* with the bottles promising relief from normalcy is in fact an anti-life series, for nothing can be added to those shapes.

SOAP BUBBLE SET IMAGE

In one of his boxes, the container of the liquid from which to make the bubble itself is broken, that returns us to the baroque and to the omnipresent danger of fragility. So we could imagine that on the other side, the Marcel Duchamp's *Air from Paris*, that enclosure in a small glass capturing of the French air in another kind of bubble. This returns us to the whole scale of possibilities: the birth, the development, and the desire for completion.

DUCHAMP AIR DE PARIS IMAGE

As Duchamp's *Air de Paris* in its glass vial cannot be changed or breathed, the bubble can only be broken, like a toy balloon. I can speak here about the fragility

of the ingrown experience, for myself I greatly fear the noise of a birthday balloon and will take myself away from the threat that explosion doing damage not only to the vision contained in the bubble, but to the entire makeup of being. Bubbles as they pop are the ultimate destroyers of the perfection of silence and that calm they would be thought to contain. The icicle may roll, the globe may contain perfection but, for some, it contains the ultimate end: POP. That the idea of celebration is rife with panic for some is part of modernist irony, reclaiming the complication of the baroque.

And then the possibilities are immense: the containment of Paris or anywhere else in that Marcel shape, and, before that, the containment of whatever vision we might want to include in our own visions, knowing they will not last.

The Other Side of the Thing

How not to desire (as in surrealism, the Art de Désirer is what is meant to last), the *Air de Paris* of Marcel Duchamp, with that air treated as precious and preserved in a tiny crystal space, no harm to it. So here, I shall not say more, shall not continue to think or breathe a further thought, even in print, about the message of one side of America, about the spoken louder than words of this side of America presenting itself to the world, about the “I can’t breathe” of George Floyd._

So we preserve ourselves from the horror of living, especially in the time of such a pandemic, threatening the lungs. And on a personal note – for such horror makes everything both personal and of course political, of my very own ninety-two year old and adored husband rest, in climbing a small hill of a sidewalk, just one block away, for we are doing our best to save our beloved restaurants., and, at other times, using a *breatholator*, the kind of instrument my father used so many years ago in the south where I grew up. That’s the kind of thing we writers need to write about right now.

About Marcel Duchamp, in a way, and not just a small way, given his salute to the urinal and to art in his chamber music of a *Fountain* as a Parisian piss pot on exhibition, of the not only mocking art man, there is fine small book on *The Last Day of Marcel Duchamp*. What a brilliant, if breathily “trivial” subject, and perhaps such a writing is, not just was, the best way to celebrate not just air but art, in something so slight, as that air of Paris was slight, and something so meaningful as that gesture.

So I am sending this in to *Venti* in my own slight way to celebrate the *Quatorze juillet* in New York, since we cannot get into France for the same non-airy reason I have just perhaps too laboriously elaborated, the shutting off of breath into and out of our country at the moment of this writing. I took on British citizenship at the moment of the Vietnam War, and were it not for Bojo's Brexit delight, we might be joining my son of Nada Surf right there in the UK, to go over to really celebrate some revolution that might be breathing not its last but its ongoing; let me, in closing this slight piece, salute the possibilities that the open air might some day bring to this *Air de New York*.

¹ I am thinking here of the HOT AIR which was playfully used as a title for the lunches of the artists frequenting the amazing Florence Griswold House in Old Lyme, Mass., which has a chapter in my *Creative Gatherings: Meeting Places of Modernism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019). They lunched on the porch and told wonderfully long tales. As this piece might feel, even as I write it.