

Sitney on Cornell

at the Collective for Living Cinema
October 5, 1979

P. Adams Sitney spoke at the Collective for Living Cinema on the films of Joseph Cornell. That is, by way of anecdote, he told us how young he was when he first met Cornell, how much a copy of Lorca's poems cost in 1963, how all our films would be shrunk to oblivion within twenty years but that thanks to him and \$1,000 for each, the films of Cornell would outlive us all; and that on his meagre living as a lecturer he's been to Europe more times than we've even thought of it. He advised us to store our work in archives, like Anthology's. He neglected to mention that that requires being *selected* as worthy of preservation.

I went to the screening without any preconceptions of his films, and hoped that they would be as splendid as his sculptures. They aren't. There's no question that Cornell was a sculptor of remarkable ingenuity and sensitivity; but similarly, if one compares Kate Millet's unimpressive sculpture to her brilliant writing, one mustn't fall prey to the misconception that talent in one art form guarantees talent in another.

If it seems that I'm being uncharitable towards Cornell's films, it's not inconsistent with Cornell's own opinion of them, a point made several times by Sitney, that is, that Cornell was careless in preserving them, that he didn't meet the offers of showing the films with much enthusiasm, etc. Perhaps that can be attributed to his modesty but I think it's more a function of Cornell having a better critical eye to his own work than Sitney has. Let me make it clear that I don't begrudge those films being saved, and shown, but I think they're undeserving of the unconditional praise that they receive at the hands of Sitney.

He described the first film, *The Bookstall*, as a poetic translation of Cornell's perpetual curiosity about countries that he'd never visited. It was, although charming at moments, a fairly obvious film both structurally and emotionally. Boy at bookstall opens book, intertitles follow in a "once upon a time" fashion, we see shots of "Marken," Asia, etc., then boy closes book. In discussing *A Legend for Fountains*, the film based on a Lorca poem, Sitney made some very superficial comments about surrealism, hotels, and those windows so reminiscent of the glass-fronted boxes. Why not mention that it was a belabored portrait of a solitary person, that the imagery and structure were quite repetitious and that the last section (after the "scorpions" title) was disjointed and looked so much

like a lesser version of Helen Levitt's lower east side footage? Or perhaps discuss, given the significant differences between film language and sculptural language, why Cornell succeeded in creating in the privacy of his boxes a meticulously specific realm of emotions and memories but failed in his attempt to reproduce that world in film.

In speaking of *Rose Hobart* (made from *East of Borneo*), he said that Cornell managed to extract just the right images, and run them at silent speed, to create a leisurely image of "beauty" (of the Hedy Lamarr sort.) I happen to like *Rose Hobart* more than the other films, but for reasons very different from those Sitney cited. The overwhelming, and surprising, impression I had was of an understated, ascerbic comment on her calculated, choreographed murder of The King. He intercut shots of Her looking terrorized with Him looking sleazy, of Her coolly removing a gun from a drawer with Him naively seducing this "beauty." In contradiction to Sitney's analysis of the shot of the sun falling into the water, I found it to be a very sardonic sexual metaphor (and judging by the laughter in the audience, I'm not alone in that reading).

In reference to one of the later films, made from found footage of Barcelona, etc., Sitney opined that Cornell had managed to create an entirely cinematic, cross-national universe, that conjoined disparate places, and that it expressed the *genius loci*, the inherent and particular spirit of a place. That seems like a lot to say about a fairly routine collection of shots strung together by quirky intertitles.

So why all the fuss? Why, because Cornell evoked such a mysterious universe in his boxes, insist that he succeeded as well in his films? He didn't, and that's really no great loss to us unless we're such film junkies that everything on celluloid is worth its weight in excessive attention. Let me add that my impressions of the films weren't as harsh as they seem here, but to watch them with a lot of reservations and many moments of boredom, and then to hear them treated so uncritically by a "critic" made me feel that much more critical of them, or, more precisely, of Sitney.

I fear, and not without a good amount of exposure to this sort of maneuver, that the Cornell mania has more to do with Sitney than with Cornell. Of course there's value in discovering as-yet unrecognized artists, but not if the effort to entrench one's power supercedes a sincere attempt to add to the body of useful knowledge. There's enough miscellanea

around to keep us busy for millennia, but why bother? If Cornell's films were such a valuable contribution to our ways of seeing and making films (and I think his contribution as a sculptor doesn't necessitate it) then why couldn't Sitney have said more? I was struck by the fact that in his introduction he felt compelled, with a large dose of false modesty, to give us a rundown of all the places he's been asked to lecture on Cornell. Pittsburgh, New York, Chicago, Boston, Colorado . . . I've observed time and again during my years studying art history that historians would pick sufficiently obscure artists and praise them so insistently, so uncritically, so vaguely, for so long, that people were bound to give them a place in the pantheon of the art gods (and mind you, that doesn't "generically" include goddesses). And what it meant in reality, that is, in terms of earning a living and getting a lecture series and having devoted audiences, was that the historian earned *his* place in the pantheon. Sitney "knows" Cornell, he babysits his restoration, he offers him magnanimously to the starving film world, and he passes the final judgement. As cynical as we might be about the establishment—the boy's club—it's dangerous to overlook the fact that because of *real* power (of, artistic/creative power)

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he and others are the ones who decide who gets shown, who gets lectured about, who gets restored at \$1000 per film, etc. And that insures the myth of the "expert." Just as anthropologists speak of "their" exotic culture, critics/historians extend their expertise in one area until everything they say is taken as the golden mean. Looks more like a golden calf to me.

Perhaps I sound bitter, but I prefer to think of it as constructive anger. I wrote this in an effort to open up communication at a time when it feels so closed, where the hushed reverence gives me chilly flashbacks to monsignor's Sunday sermons. I don't deny or underestimate the valuable contribution that P. Adams Sitney has made to film criticism, or that other art critics have made to our understanding of formal issues, but there's a limit. And we should be the ones to define that limit, because anyone who sits on a throne too long loses sight of his frequent nakedness.

Simply put, the discrepancy between what Sitney claimed to be doing (elucidating the valuable qualities of Cornell's film work) and what he was in fact doing throughout the lecture (elucidating his "invaluable" role as an archeologist of a minor civilization) was too great for this critic to bear.

Su Friedrich



The Brooklyn Bridge promenade, 1903