Surrealism on the Rise: The Copley Galleries and Joseph Cornell in Hollywood

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William Nelson Copley (January 24, 1919, to May 7, 1996), also known as CPLY, was an artist, writer, gallerist, collector, and patron of the arts. He was one of the two heirs of the newspaper magnate Ira C. Copley, who, after selling his family-owned gas company, built his fortune by acquiring several dozen newspapers in the Midwest and California. Bill Copley, together with his older brother James, were supposed to take over the family business, but young Bill never felt prepared for the lifestyle that had been planned for him, and once the Second World War broke out he enrolled in the army and went overseas. Discharged from the infantry on August 30, 1945, he returned home and married Doris Wead (on September 15, 1945), through whom he met John Ployardt, an animator at the Walt Disney Studios in Los Angeles where he worked on storyboards and set designs. Ployardt disliked his job and was eager to undertake new artistic opportunities, including sparking Copley's interest in art, teaching him technical aspects of painting, and eventually introducing him to surrealism. Years later, when discussing his fascination with the movement, Copley recalled that surrealism "made everything understandable: my genteel family, the war, and why I attended the Yale prom without my shoes. It looked like something I might succeed at."[1] Shortly after his discovery of surrealism, Copley embarked on what became "the most ambitious presentation of surrealist art in Los Angeles … the significant but short-lived and underappreciated gallery that Copley himself opened in 1948 in Beverly Hills with his brother-in-law, John Ployardt."[2] (fig.141). The Copley Galleries opened their doors in September 1948

1 *William N. Copley. X-Rated*, Anne Doran and William N. Copley, eds., exh. cat. (New York: Paul Kasmin Gallery New York, 2010), p. 67.

2 Andrew Perchuk and Catherine Taft, "Floating Structures: Building the Modern in Postwar Los Angeles," in Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips, and Rani Singh, eds., *Pacific Standard Time. Los Angeles Art 1945–1980* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), p. 18.

141 Photographer unknown, exterior of the Copley Galleries at 257 North Canon Drive in Beverly Hills, DATE. Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, William Nelson Copley Papers.

on 257 North Cannon Drive, Beverly Hills, to exist only for a brief six months until February 1949. Nevertheless, in this short period the gallery presented works by René Magritte, Joseph Cornell, Roberto Matta, Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, and Max Ernst—in that order—becoming the only gallery on the West Coast exclusively dedicated to the promotion of European surrealist artists. Reminiscing about the time when they started the gallery business, Copley recalled:

> "Southern California in 1946 was a most unlikely and certainly a most unnecessary place to proselytize Surrealism. As Man Ray once said, there was more Surrealism rampant in Hollywood than all the surrealists could invent in a lifetime. The natives didn't know this. The place was an intellectual desert, never mind the film industry's pretensions to the contrary."[3]

Los Angeles was a very large community with a lot of wealth but very few collections on a par with those of Walter and Louise Arensberg, Galka E. Scheyer, or Ruth Maitland. There were many antique shops

3 Doran and Copley, *William N. Copley* (note 1), p. 67.

but few galleries (and the ones that existed were mostly focused on Mexican and post-impressionist art), making Copley believe that with the right approach he could turn this paucity around in favor of the surrealists.[4]

Surveying the artistic and political context of the 1930s and 1940s in southern California, this essay contextualizes the founding of the gallery, the exhibitions mounted, and the resulting sales. Emphasizing the strategies that Copley developed to actively promote the artists he represented, it analyzes the market created around these artists, as well as the network built through the gallery to support their practices. And finally, by focusing on Joseph Cornell's exhibition at the gallery, it brings to the fore the mark left by this show on the promotion of Cornell's work in the local context and further evaluates the Copley Galleries' contribution to the dissemination of European surrealism in the Los Angeles area.

The political and artistic context of the 1930s and 1940s in and around Los Angeles

Modern art was perceived and received differently in Los Angeles compared to other major American art cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. While in close geographic vicinity, artistic production and reception in San Francisco received stimulus mainly from art schools and museums, whereas in Los Angeles the few existing collections were for the most part in private hands.[5] This fact led to a general feeling of mistrust in Los Angeles toward these new movements, which were chiefly associated with non-American trends.[6] In unison with other cities, many of the avant-garde movements were regarded as subversive, communist propaganda,[7] and therefore met with considerable criticism and a certain revulsion from the local community. Consequently, the "postwar suppression of aesthetic and political

4 Ibid.

5 Susan M. Anderson, "Journey into the Sun. California Artists and Surrealism," in Paul J. Karlstrom, ed., *On the Edge of America. California Modernist Art, 1900–1950* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 181.

6 Perchuk and Taft, "Floating Structures" (note 2), p. 21.

7 Ibid. The quote from US representative George A. Dondero's speech titled "Modern Art Shackled to Communism" presented before the House of Representatives reads, "I call the roll of infamy without claim that my list is all-inclusive: Dadaism, futurism, constructionism, suprematism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, and abstractionism. All these *isms* are of foreign origin and truly should have no place in American art. While not all are media of social or political protest, all are instruments and weapons of destruction. … Cubism aims to destroy by designed disorder. … Expressionism aims to destroy by aping the primitive and insane. … Abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorms. Surrealism aims to destroy by the denial of reason."

leftism hindered museum exhibitions of modern art and drove many artists underground, further intensifying the private nature of modern art."[8] This resulted in "the development of a largely 'insider' art world where the interested parties had to find their own way into museum-like homes through personal relationships, word of mouth, or class field trips."[9] As in architecture, progressive views were mostly represented by private patrons, who made it their mission to disseminate their passion for modern art.

One such patron was Galka E. Scheyer, a collector originally from Germany who was committed to promoting the works of the "Blue Four" (Wassily Kandinsky, Alexei Jawlensky, Paul Klee, and Lyonel Feininger) in the United States. Scheyer moved to Los Angeles in the 1930s hoping to secure Hollywood patronage for these artists, and subsequently dedicated much of her effort to organizing receptions and lectures that brought local awareness to the work of these artists. The fact that commercial success never followed her endeavors illustrates that there was no real market for modernist artworks in the 1940s.[10] Another notable patron of the arts at the time was Ruth Maitland, who enriched her inherited collection of nineteenth-century French paintings with works by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Paul Cézanne, and Henri Matisse.[11]

The most impressive collection of modern art belonged to Walter and Louise Arensberg, which included works by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi, René Magritte, Giorgio de Chirico, Henri Rousseau, Pablo Picasso, and Piet Mondrian. Aware of the limited options for viewing contemporary art, the Arensbergs were open to welcoming guests in their home to present their modern art collection. The curator Walter Hopps recalled that on his visits to their home in the late 1940s, "There was more modern art than I had seen anywhere. No museum in Southern California had anything like their collection."[12] In his memoirs Hopps explained that "the Arensbergs were far and away the most important collectors ever in the Western United States, and theirs was the first really great collection of the advanced art of the twentieth century."[13] The Arensbergs hoped for a Museum of Modern Art similar to the one in New York to be built in the West, where their collection, together with those of Ruth Maitland and Galka

8 Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips, and Rani Singh, "Shifting the Standard. Reappraising Art in Los Angeles," in Peabody et al., *Pacific Standard Time* (note 2), p. 2.
9 Ibid., p. 7.
10 Ibid., p. 8.
11 Ibid.
12 Walter Hopps, Anne Doran, and Deborah Treisman, eds., *The Dream Colony. A Life in Art* (New York/London: St. Martin's Press, 2017), p. 31.
13 Ibid.

E. Scheyer, could be donated to form the basis of a permanent collection.[14] Unfortunately, these plans never materialized and the collections all went in different directions.

Besides the private collectors, the local art scene counted at that time just a handful of commercial players. Earl Stendahl was a candy-maker turned dealer who operated out of his residence in Hollywood and dealt profitably "in pre-Columbian art, most of which he had sold to his next-door neighbour, Walter Arensberg. He also dealt in Tamayo, Siqueiros, and Rivera and occasionally in Impressionists, too."[15] The existing commercial galleries were mostly located in the lobbies of large hotels spread across Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and downtown Los Angeles. Dazil Hatfield had a gallery in the Ambassador Hotel; Cowie Gallery operated from the downtown Biltmore Hotel, and the Francis Taylor Gallery from the Beverly Hills Hotel.[16] Other players mentioned by Copley are the Frank Perls Gallery in Hollywood, a conservative enterprise but one that still dealt in works by Paul Klee; Ralph Altman, who was a dealer in antiques and primitive art; Paul Cantor, who according to Copley had a "brave gallery but had to become fashionable"; and Paul Wescher, the curator of the private collection of J. Paul Getty and that of actor Vincent Price.[17] Even though he was not mentioned by Copley, another progressive dealer of the time and an early promoter of avant-garde movements was the artist Frederick Kann. Kann moved to Los Angeles in 1943 and established the Circle Gallery in Hollywood where he showed his own work along with that of other abstract artists, and was one of the only dealers to present abstract art at the time.[18]

While his contribution is mostly forgotten today, the dealer Howard Putzel made a significant attempt in the 1930s to show the work of the surrealists in California when the movement was virtually unknown in the galleries.[19] In collaboration with New York gallerist Julien Levy, Putzel organized several shows of European surrealism in the Bay Area (1934–1935) and later in Los Angeles (1935–1938), before moving to Paris and finally returning to New York in 1940. He worked as a director of the Paul Elder Gallery in San Francisco in 1934, where he organized an exhibition of paintings and drawings by Salvador Dalí and arranged

14 After Scheyer's death, her estate donated the works to the Pasadena Art Institute, now the Norton Simon Museum.

15 Ibid., p. 67.

16 Perchuk and Taft, "Floating Structures" (note 2), pp. 16, 68.

17 Doran and Copley, *William N. Copley* (note 1), pp. 67–68.

18 Anderson, "Journey into the Sun" (note 5), p. 181.

19 Melvin Paul Lader, Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century. The Surrealist Milieu and the American Avant-Garde, 1942–1947, PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1981 (available from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan), p. 145.

Max Ernst's first show on the West Coast.[20] After one season he moved to Los Angeles in 1935 to become the director of the Stanley Rose Gallery, where he continued presenting surrealist artists. In addition to the Max Ernst show (which was probably the same one he had mounted in San Francisco), he organized a retrospective of works by Joan Miró (October to November, 1935), an exhibition of paintings by Yves Tanguy (November to December, 1935), one of etchings by Salvador Dalí (January 1936), and a group show by Yves Tanguy, André Masson, Joan Miró, and Max Ernst, among others (April 1936).[21] In 1936 he left Rose's gallery to open his own business, the Putzel Gallery, that was located on 6729 Hollywood Boulevard, formerly the Hollywood Gallery of Modern Art.[22] In his own gallery he continued showing avant-garde painters, such as Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, Henri Rousseau, and Yves Tanguy.[23] While the exhibitions were well received, the works shown were not completely grasped by the public and consequently Putzel closed his gallery at the end of the 1937–1938 season; it appears that "the primary reason was undoubtedly financial, coupled with the lack of appreciation and education in modern art that was apparent in Hollywood at that time."[24] While Howard Putzel was most likely the first dealer to link European surrealism to California, showing throughout his career many artists who were surrealist in spirit, his program was focused on avant-garde and not exclusively on the surrealists. After shuttering his gallery, Putzel eventually relocated to the East Coast, where he lived until his death in 1945.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Los Angeles also counted three avant-garde bookstores: Stanley Rose's (operating from 1935 to 1939 from Hollywood Boulevard), Jake Zeitlin's (who opened his first bookstore in 1928 on Hope Street near Sixth Street in downtown Los Angeles, moving it twenty years later to La Cienaga Boulevard), and Mel Royer's (located at 465 North Robertson Boulevard in West Hollywood). These stores were focal points for cultural events and hosted exhibitions of avant-garde artists. Stanley Rose's bookstore and gallery was a gathering place for artists and writers living in and around Hollywood. His legendary Back Room acted as a small gallery and hosted the earliest exhibitions of avant-garde and modernist artists, such as Philip Guston, Lorser Feitelson, and Helen Lundeberg.[25] It was also the first place in

20 Lader, *Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century* (note 19), pp. 146–147.
21 Ibid, p. 149.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 150. For the complete list of names, see ibid., note p. 185.
24 Ibid., p. 153.
25 Catherine Taft, "The Post-Surrealists," in Peabody et al., *Pacific Standard Time* (note 2), p. 39.

the Los Angeles area to show the work of surrealist artists, at Howard Putzel's initiative. Zeitlin, a major cultural driving force in the region, was the first to exhibit the photographs of Edward Weston and the work of German artist Käthe Kollwitz. Mel Royer produced and sold surrealist pamphlets and literature, and was in fact the first gallery to exhibit Copley's own artworks in 1951.[26] Even though these venues were key disseminators of modern trends like surrealism, trading in surrealist works didn't provide a reliable enough source of income. Copley later explained that Royer made his money by selling high-end pornographic material from the back of his store.[27]

A major initiative to promote contemporary art at an institutional level was the non-profit Modern Institute of Art, which had the ambition to create a local equivalent of New York's Museum of Modern Art. The institute opened on February 12, 1948, at 344 1/2 North Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Aiming to present works from prominent local collections and to attract major traveling exhibitions from other cities, its inaugural show "Modern Artists in Transition" brought together works by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Marc Chagall, and Marcel Duchamp. Despite support from patrons and the art public, the institute failed to raise the budget needed for the following year and closed down due to financial deficits by spring 1949, leaving the city without sustainable non-profit venues for displaying contemporary art—bearing testimony to the fact that there wasn't enough support from the local community to sustain ambitious public institutions dedicated to avant-garde movements.

Despite the conservative nature of the local artistic community, traces of surrealism had penetrated the Los Angeles area through artworks included in the notable local private collections, as well as through small exhibitions at the Stanley Rose Gallery. Nevertheless, the movement had not been present in a coherent form in any institutional program. In fact, possibly the most organized and well-defined response to European surrealism in Los Angeles in the 1930s was formulated by a local group of artists who called themselves "Post-Surrealists." Conceived as a critique of the European version of surrealism, the group founded by Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundberg established the basis for an American version of the movement. The radical difference between the two currents was that post-surrealism worked from the conscious mind rather than the subconscious, as the European surrealists did. The post-surrealists sought to elicit a reasoned response in the viewer, who was asked to contemplate the metaphysical ideas expressed in their works. Their first group

26 Perchuk and Taft, "Floating Structures" (note 2), p. 18.
27 Ibid.

exhibition was held in 1934 at Stanley Rose's Centaur Gallery, followed by group shows in San Francisco at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935 and in New York at the Brooklyn Museum in 1936. Works by Feitelson, Lundeberg, and Knud Merrild were also included in Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at New York's Museum of Modern Art (even if it was mentioned in the introduction that their presence was an anomaly given that they did not support exploring the power of the unconscious).[28] Other artists who periodically showed with the post-surrealists were Lucien Labaudt and Harold Lehman, with Philip Guston, Grace Clemens, and Rueben Kadish joining later.[29] Feitelson and Lundberg remained, however, the core exponents of the movement and were major figures in popularizing the aesthetics of surrealism not only in Los Angeles but also further afield in the United States. Nevertheless, their approach remained faithful to the cognitive process, which "was insufficiently dramatic to sustain the momentum of [the] public fascination their first exhibitions had generated."[30] While surrealism was not a completely new movement at the end of the 1930s, the continued interest in European surrealism in the United States, and consequently in the Los Angeles area in the 1940s, could also be linked to the war and the physical displacement of European artists. Knowing that some of these artists were living in close proximity was a major factor in Copley and Ployardt's decision to open a surrealist gallery in Hollywood.

The Copley Galleries

While Copley and Ployardt had no previous experience in running a business, they spent a year researching their strategies. Their first tactical decision concerned the gallery's location, for which they rented a bungalow in Beverly Hills in close vicinity to Hollywood, where they hoped to find their future clientele. After evaluating the existing local art scene as not "particularly exciting,"[31] they sought further advice from the Arensbergs. Copley visited their collection on several occasions and thought that they could provide valuable information concerning the opening of an avant-garde gallery. In a letter requesting an interview with the patrons, Copley and Ployardt explained the underlying operating principles of their future gallery:

28 Richard Candida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent. Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 14–15.

29 Taft, "The Post-Surrealists" (note 25), p. 39.

30 Smith, *Utopia and Dissent* (note 28), p. 11.

31 Letter from William N. Copley and John Ployardt to Walter C. Arensberg, December 15, 1947, Box 5, Folder 31, Arensberg Archives, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.

> "We are writing to ask you for an interview and for advice concerning our plans for opening a commercial art gallery in Los Angeles. … Briefly, we intend to emphasize quality, and quality alone. We plan to be bold and to concentrate on publicizing both the artists we represent and our gallery, with dignity but with éclat. We intend to present art as a dynamic way of living rather than as interior decoration."[32]

With these goals in mind, the two first approached Man Ray, who was living at that time anonymously across the street from the Hollywood Ranch Market. Due to the volatile political situation, the artist had fled Europe during the Second World War and returned to the United States hoping to find the same success he had enjoyed abroad. But since his expectations were not met, he was open to new artistic opportunities and accepted to show at the Copley Galleries on the condition of 10 percent guaranteed sales. As a token of his gratitude he put the duo in touch with Marcel Duchamp, who was then living in New York (fig. 142). Copley and Ployardt traveled to New York in March 1948 to meet with him.[33] At the time of their meeting, Duchamp had publicly retired from art-making, so instead of discussing his own work he preferred to help them with introductions to other figures in the New York art scene. Copley recalled:

142 Photographer unknown, left to right: Man Ray, Juliet Ray, William Copley, and Marcel Duchamp aboard the S.S. *De Grasse* before their departure for Paris on March 12, 1951. Washington, DC, Archives of American Art, William Nelson Copley Papers.

32 Ibid.
33 Doran and Copley, *William N. Copley* (note 1), p. 70.

> "Marcel sent us to Alexander Iolas. This was sensible. … Marcel rightfully assumed we were mad in the sense that Iolas was. He also certainly understood that the passion Iolas had for his artists Ernst, Magritte, Brauner, Berard, et al., didn't have too much to do with successful industry and commerce. He made us a good match."[34]

Duchamp also introduced them to Roberto Matta and contacted Max Ernst to ask him to meet with them at his home in Arizona. On their way back from New York to California, Copley and Ployardt visited Ernst and Dorothea Tanning in Sedona and talked to them about their plans to open a gallery, and asked to show both artists' works in Hollywood. This idea was met with much enthusiasm, and Tanning further presented the idea to Joseph Cornell:

> "Some nice lads from Hollywood came here last week. … They are opening a surrealist gallery and were full of enthusiasm for your work. We all spoke of you, of your own special genius, of their plans for showing it to the west coast public. Well, I hope for their success."[35]

After these first successful meetings during their trip to the East Coast, several exhibitions were planned for the Copley Galleries. Not all of these eventuated, but the gallery nevertheless hosted six monographic shows in total, in the following order: the first exhibition opened on September 9, 1948, of works by René Magritte consigned through Alexander Iolas of the Hugo Gallery; the second opened on September 28, 1949, of works by Joseph Cornell purchased directly from the artist during Copley and Ployardt's visit to the Hugo Gallery; the third was dedicated to Roberto Matta and opened on October 18, 1948; the fourth opened in November 1948, showing works by Yves Tanguy and for which the gallery received loans from Pierre Matisse, transforming the show into a mini-retrospective;[36] the fifth ran from December 17, 1948, to January 9, 1949, with works by Man Ray, who was the only artist to be directly involved in the planning and installation of the exhibition; and the sixth and last show, held from January 10 to February 20, 1949, was the first ever retrospective of Max Ernst's work. This last show was the most elaborate exhibition staged at the Copley Galleries and included loans from Julien Levy, Alexander Iolas, Pierre Matisse, Marie-

34 Ibid., p. 71.

35 Letter from Dorothea Tanning to Joseph Cornell, April 29, 1947, Joseph Cornell Papers, 1804–1986, bulk 1939–1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

36 Susan Davidson, "A Breton in Connecticut. Yves Tanguy and His American Audience," in Karin von Maur, ed., *Yves Tanguy and Surrealism*, cat. exh. (Houston: Menil Collection, 2001), p. 188.

Laure, Vicomtesse de Noailles, Al Lewin, and the Museum of Modern Art. Copley planned two other shows, for Dorothea Tanning and Paul Delvaux, but these never came to fruition as the gallery closed due to financial distress.

With regard to the local visibility of these shows, Man Ray recalled in his memoirs that "the openings were attended by all Hollywood. Much whiskey was consumed, few works were sold."[37] Nevertheless, Copley recounted that the shows attracted hardly any visitors and were badly received by the museum world: "We were almost totally ignored. We were attacked by most of the critics. And totally unattended."[38] In any case, the gallery suffered from extremely poor sales, inevitably leading to its closure. Copley stated in his memoirs that only two works were ever sold—a painting and a gouache by René Magritte, purchased by Stanley Barbie the morning after the opening night.[39] These works were paid for on the spot, but never collected. Copley believed that due to his inebriation, Barbie might have forgotten that he had bought the works, but he nonetheless sent them to him when the gallery closed.[40] As for the other exhibitions, since 10 percent of sales was guaranteed to each artist, Copley ended up being the best customer of his own shows. Consequently, he collected important pieces by the exhibited artists, building up one of the most impressive surrealist art collections in the United States, later to be auctioned at Sotheby's for a record price.[41]

Despite Copley's claims, there are in fact sales records of works other than those he purchased for his own collection. According to Man Ray, "besides the large painting, *The Lovers*, which Bill reserved for himself, one other was sold to Al Lewin."[42] Further records reveal sales following Yves Tanguy's show at the gallery as well. In an essay discussing Tanguy's activities in the United States, Susan Davidson mentions Copley's correspondence with Pierre Matisse concerning the Yves Tanguy exhibition held in Los Angeles. Copley wrote to Matisse:

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37 Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (Boston/Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1963), p. 355.

38 William N. Copley, oral history interview by Paul Cummings, January 30, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Rita Reif, "Man Ray Painting Brings $750,000," *New York Times*, November 6, 1979, https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/06/archives/man-ray-painting-brings-750000-bought-by-european-collector-other.html, accessed July 13, 2018. The article states, "The sale totaled $6 million, second only for a single-owner art auction in America to the $6.9 million racked up at the Norton Simon 1973 sale. And 15 artists' records had been rewritten, including Man Ray at $750,000. The second highest price of the night was the $620,000 paid by the Byron Gallery, the New York dealer, for Max Ernst's *Surrealism and Painter*. The Miró record became $330,000 with the sale of *Bird Pursuing a Bee and Kissing It* to a Paris dealer, and the Magritte record was changed when David Geffen, the Los Angeles record producer, bought the painting depicting a green apple filling a room entitled *Listening Room*."

42 Man Ray, *Self-portrait* (note 37), p. 355.

> "Just a note to tell you how happy we are with the Tanguy show. The general response here seems to be that this is the most beautiful show we have hung to date. Also it may be proving the turning point in our fortune here. We sold one oil and one gouache the opening night and since then we have two more prospective sales which have fair promise of materializing."[43]

According to the Pierre Matisse Gallery archives, of the thirty-six works loaned for the exhibition at the Copley Galleries, thirty-four were returned. Two paintings, *When We See* (1941) and *Toward Ancient Calls* (1946), as well as two gouaches from 1946, *Irrational Numbers* and *Complex Numbers*, were noted as sold.[44]

Further sales records concern the gallery's last and most important show, the Max Ernst retrospective. In Ployardt's letter to Julien Levy of November 6, 1948, he thanked Levy for his willingness to collaborate in the venture, assuring him that sales would follow Ernst's well-deserved retrospective.[45] The financial arrangements were set out in a letter dated August 19, 1948:

> "[P]ayment one way on all shipments which will include insurance, packing, and framing (when actually necessary, as we find this one of our most frightening expenses); sharing in sales on either a percentage or fixed price basis, whichever would be more attractive to you. We would also appreciate any publicity material (including photographs, etc.) which could be forwarded at our expense."[46]

While Copley lamented that this show had been the greatest disaster of all because of the enormous effort it had required,[47] in a letter to Julien Levy of March 3, 1949, he stated that "Max's show was actually a great success, and almost a success financially considering that the expenses involved belonged to a museum [were similar to a museum's exhibition budget] and not to a gallery."[48] In this letter, Copley also specified some positive financial details: "Incidentally I owe you money. We sold five

43 Davidson, "A Breton in Connecticut (note 37), p. 188.
44 Ibid, see notes p. 196.
45 Letter from John Ployardt to Julien Levy, November 6, 1948, Box 9, Folder 25, Julien Levy Gallery Records, 1957–1982, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.
46 Letter from Ployardt to Levy, August 19, 1948, Box 9, Folder 25, Julien Levy Gallery Records, 1957–1982, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.
47 Doran and Copley, *William N. Copley* (note 1), p. 82.
48 Letter from William N. Copley to Julien Levy, March 3, 1949, Box 9, Folder 25, Julien Levy Gallery Records, 1957–1982, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.

of the *Microbes* out of the show, at $90 a piece which at 10% nets to you $45, for which [a] check is enclosed."[49]

While the gallery sales did not bring the desired financial success and were not able to maintain healthy functioning of the enterprise, they did eventuate, proving that a small, specialized market for European surrealist works was able to develop during the lifetime of the gallery. At the same time, the effort that went into the presentation and promotion of the shows increased the surrealists' visibility in Hollywood. While there had been previous endeavors to promote the works of European surrealists by a number of other galleries, they were not sufficient to provide the necessary push to ensure the success of the Copley Galleries project. Nevertheless, even after the gallery closed, Copley continued to promote the artists he had represented, as well as the two shows he had planned for Dorothea Tanning and Paul Delvaux. He explained to Julien Levy that the American Contemporary Gallery (a small commercial outfit that had moved to a new location at the time of Copley's 1949 letter[50]) was interested in hosting the Delvaux exhibition after the planned Alice Rahon and Tanning shows that Copley was personally helping to finance. He mentioned that he could "speak personally of [the American Contemporary Gallery's] integrity and can't think of anyone else who is doing anything here."[51] Even though his own venture had come to an end, Copley was still actively supporting surrealist artists in the Los Angeles area well into the early 1950s.

Joseph Cornell at the Copley Galleries

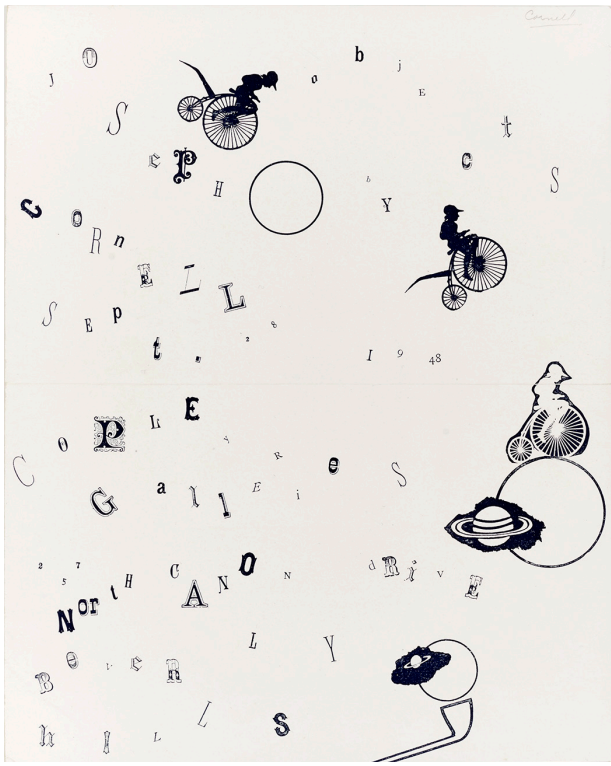
Cornell lived his entire life within a one-hundred-mile radius of New York City. He was a man of great privacy and discretion, who stayed out of the limelight of the art world. He was good friends with Marcel Duchamp, with Duchamp becoming a great promoter of Cornell's work. Cornell was the type of artist who didn't thrive on financial success and as a result his relationship with dealers was at times contradictory, as described by his biographer Deborah Solomon: "[H]e resented it when they couldn't sell his work, and resented it even more when they could."[52] Cornell also did not enjoy attending the openings of his shows; he preferred working with dealers operating at a distance,

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid. Copley further elaborated in his letter to Levy: "This little Gallery is quite honest and courageous."

51 Ibid.

52 Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway. The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (Boston: MFA Publications; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), p. 171.



143 Letter of announcement for the exhibition of works by Joseph Cornell at the Copley Galleries, 1948. Washington, DC, Archives of American Art, William Nelson Copley Papers.

which was perhaps one of the reasons for his collaboration with the Copley Galleries. Copley and Ployardt met Cornell at Iolas's gallery (at that time the Hugo Gallery), and Copley recounted his first impressions of the artist in great detail. He described him as a "gaunt cadaverous Charles Adams-like character"[53] who one day came into the Hugo Gallery and, while hoping to remain unnoticed by the visitors, started unpacking artworks out of paper shopping bags. Copley and Ployardt were instantly mesmerized by the "magical toy-like boxes."[54]

> "The boxes astounded us. We would of course have a show of them. He asked no more than a hundred dollars for any one of them. This worried us. They were treasures, conceived of nostalgia and fantasy; nostalgia for childhood, old times and places, and beautiful people long dead."[55]

53 Doran and Copley, *William N. Copley* (note 1), p. 71.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., pp. 71–72.

144 Photographer unknown, installation view of the Joseph Cornell exhibition at the Copley Galleries, 1948. Washington, DC, Archives of American Art, William Nelson Copley Papers.

This encounter, together with the praise Cornell received from the surrealist circle—Duchamp, Iolas, Levy, Ernst, and Tanning—convinced Copley to buy a stack of boxes and present them in the Copley Galleries. He later remembered that "it took courage to do it at that time, and we thought it was our courage that would win for us."[56] The invitation to the show and the catalogue strove to be in line with Cornell's oeuvre, using lettering randomly torn out and resembling a ransom note (fig. 143). The exhibition setting was royal blue and white (fig. 144). Copley and Ployardt rented a white high-wheel bicycle and draped it with blue velvet and included it in the show (fig. 145). The boxes themselves were presented on shelves in niches where bookshelves had existed in the gallery rooms (fig. 146). In Copley's words, "The result was quite beautiful and publicly disastrous as it proved forbidding and claustrophobic to anyone not already drunk on Cornell and we were

56 Ibid., p. 75.

145 Photographer unknown, installation view of the Joseph Cornell exhibition at the Copley Galleries, 1948. Washington, DC, Archives of American Art, William Nelson Copley Papers.

146 Photographer unknown, installation view of the Joseph Cornell exhibition at the Copley Galleries, 1948. Washington, DC, Archives of American Art, William Nelson Copley Papers.

the only such two in town."[57] The opening was well attended but there were no sales and also no visitors during the month of the presentation. Copley later mentioned that they ended up giving the boxes to "good homes, just like puppies."[58] Cornell blamed the two dealers for this failure as he thought it was the result of the inflated prices the gallery asked. On the prices attributed, Copley explained:

> "We were ourselves infatuated with the prices. … We'd bought them and they were still embarrassingly inexpensive, so much that we had to double the prices just to live with ourselves. We priced them one hundred to two hundred dollars and added a percentage for Cornell."[59]

After the show, it took several years for Copley to regain Cornell's trust. Cornell's works however were the only ones purchased in advance from an artist shown in the gallery, proving Copley's immediate fascination with the then inexpensive boxes. At that time, the sale of the fifty boxes would also have been one of Cornell's most notable commercial deals. In his thirteen-year collaboration with Julien Levy (which ended in 1946), the dealer had sold very few works. Years later, Levy recalled that although he was unable to locate his sales book of Cornell's works, most of the sales were to himself and James Thrall Soby (a short-time partner of the gallery).[60]

While Cornell's exhibition was not received by the local public the way Copley and Ployardt had anticipated, the gallery was still the first promoter of Cornell's work in southern California. This show additionally left a deep mark on the young Walter Hopps, who would give Cornell his first real museum retrospective more than fifteen years later. Copley's interest in and promotion of Cornell did not stop in California. Once he moved to Paris and established the non-profit William and Noma Copley Foundation in 1954 in support of the visual arts, he granted the first award to Joseph Cornell. His promotion of an American artist in Europe is indicative of his devotion to the artists he worked with, as well as his commitment to continuing the efforts he began during his brief gallery years.

57 Ibid., p. 75.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Solomon, *Utopia Parkway* (note 52), p. 171.

Walter Hopps at the Copley Galleries

One of the visitors deeply impressed by the Copley Galleries' shows was the curator Walter Hopps (1932–2005). In his memoirs Hopps related that during high school, when he became interested in art, he could only get information about new and postwar art from books and magazines, as "there was almost no contemporary art worth a damn in the local museums then."[61] While San Francisco and the Bay Area had more to offer in terms of contemporary art, Hopps still remarked that back in the late 1940s and first half of the 1950s, "so much of what one saw, both in San Francisco and New York, when I finally got there, was still in studios—not even in galleries yet, let alone museums."[62] Nevertheless, Hopps did manage to encounter noteworthy art venues in the late 1940s:

> "In 1948, I heard about Copley Galleries, on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, which was owned by an artist called William Copley and his brother-in-law, John Ployardt. Copley was an artist [and] also the husband of six wives, the father of three children, an amazing gallerist, a great collector of Surrealist art, and ultimately a major philanthropist."[63]

Hopps further described his first impressions of Copley and his early fascination with Cornell's works, which he had seen for the first time at the Copley Galleries:

> "I was fifteen and still too young to drive when I first discovered the gallery, but I had a friend take me there for the Joseph Cornell show. I didn't know Copley, and I'd never heard of Cornell, but the show was just magical. … Not one of them sold. I think Bill bought them all for himself in the end, because they were so cheap. I started searching around for more of Cornell's work in books, but I didn't know what books to look at."[64]

After becoming acquainted with Cornell's work in the Copley Galleries, Hopps nurtured a lifelong fascination for the work of this artist. In 1955, when living on the East Coast, he went to the Stable Gallery and bought the most expensive Cornell on sale, *Habitat for a Shooting Gallery* (1943), for $750, wiping out all the family savings.[65] Hopps began

61 Hopps et al., *The Dream Colony* (note 12), p. 24.
62 Ibid., p. 26.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 27.
65 Ibid., p. 189.

showing works by Cornell during his time at the Ferus Gallery (which operated from 1957 to 1966 from North La Cienaga Boulevard in Los Angeles and where Hopps worked until 1962) and later in 1964 in a group show at the Dwan Gallery (which operated from the Westwood neighborhood from 1959 to 1967 and in New York from 1965 to 1971). Cornell was well into his sixties when he finally received major recognition for his work. The artist never had a retrospective or major museum show before the one mounted by Hopps at the Pasadena Art Museum from January 9 to February 11, 1967. Despite delays in its organization, the show turned out to be a great success. Hopps's presentation shared certain similarities with that of the Copley Galleries show as the boxes were placed on dark shelves with spotlights illuminating them. The *New York Times* described it as the "most dramatic example of [Hopps's] legendary wizardry in matters of installation."[66]

It was also through the Copley Galleries that Hopps became acquainted with the work of other major artists. Hopps mentions in his memoirs that Man Ray had made a "tactical error"[67] in thinking that in Hollywood he would find a clientele for his work among the wealthy movie magnates, an error that Copley seems to have repeated. He further mentioned that the Copley Galleries were almost empty the day he visited the Man Ray show. Copley discussed the works with him and eventually sent the young Hopps on a quasi-prank visit to Man Ray's home.[68] Through Copley's help, Hopps later arranged Marcel Duchamp's show in 1963. "No retrospective of Duchamp had been mounted yet, and Bill Copley was able to put me in touch with Marcel to arrange it,"[69] resulting in one of Hopps's most notable shows to be held at the Pasadena Art Museum. Copley's network thus continued to serve the dissemination of surrealism in southern California well after he had closed the doors of his gallery and officially stopped his activities as a dealer.

Conclusions about surrealism in Hollywood and the local impact of the Copley Galleries

Surrealism and avant-garde trends were already present in the Los Angeles area during the 1930s in a few forward-looking private collections, as well as in small presentations across the handful of avant-garde bookstores and galleries. A coherent and well-organized response to the European version of surrealism emerged through the American post-surrea-

66 Solomon, *Utopia Parkway* (note 52), p. 331.
67 Hopps et al., *The Dream Colony* (note 12), p. 28.
68 Ibid., p. 29.
69 Ibid., p. 157.

list group, however this group distanced itself from the ideas brought forth by André Breton's circle. In the beginning of the 1940s, interest in European surrealism was reignited during the war years as a result of the exile of some of the European artists to the United States. Nevertheless, the political climate remained conservative toward avant-garde trends, garnering no substantial interest in the works of these artists.

While the Copley Galleries was not the first venue to locally promote surrealist artists, at the time the gallery opened its doors to the public there was no strong and accomplished market for such artworks (Galka E. Scheyer's efforts in disseminating the works of the "Blue Four" never truly met with financial success, either). Copley and Ployardt's strategy for selling these works was finding new clientele among the wealthy movie moguls living in the Hollywood area. They had hoped that through their conviction and shows they could spark the interest of the local community, which had pretensions to intellectual culture. Unfortunately their efforts did not bring the anticipated success, leading to the closure of the gallery after only six months. Nevertheless, in contrast to the general consensus on its lack of financial success, sales did occur, showing that the gallery contoured a local market for surrealist artworks. Furthermore, the effort invested in mounting six monographic exhibitions for the surrealist artists—with one being the first ever retrospective of Max Ernst's work—positioned the Copley Galleries as the most coherent showcase for European surrealism in Hollywood. In addition, the Copley Galleries' efforts to promote surrealism left an indelible mark on the local arts scene in terms of the visibility and recognition of the artists presented. It was through this venue that the farsighted curator Walter Hopps was introduced to Joseph Cornell and Man Ray's work and eventually established contact with Marcel Duchamp.

While efforts to promote avant-garde and surrealist art were not fully grasped by the local public, California was not the cultural backwater it was thought to be, and avant-garde movements influenced a future generation of artists, writers, and filmmakers:

> "By the 1950s … the art scene in Los Angeles was remarkably diverse: an increasing number of commercial galleries were paralleled by informal spaces that experimented with alternative means of production, display, and dissemination. The use of found materials to make works of collage and assemblage reflected an interest in surrealism, jazz, and folk traditions."[70]

70 Peabody et al., "Shifting the Standard" (note 8), p. 2.

Well into the 1960s, the influence of surrealism was still present in Hollywood, as seen in Ed Ruscha's design for the cover of the September 1966 issue of *Artforum*, in which the word "surrealism" bursts forth from a background of golden bubbles.[71]

* * *

> It's different now. When I do return to California from time to time, the past is treated reverentially. I am rather respected and accused of having had foresight. It would be unfair or disillusioning to spill the beans that we really didn't know what we were doing at all. Unhappily, the brother-in-law died with an automobile and cannot share the belated credit. It seems better that I try to accept such admiration with modesty. The past is always a beautiful time.[72]
>
> —William N. Copley

71 Edward Ruscha, "Surrealism soaped and scrubbed," (Cover design by) *Artforum*, no. 1 (September 1966).

72 Doran and Copley, *William N. Copley* (note 1), p. 82.