“During the twenties I was especially interested in objects, by which I also mean man, that obelisk-bonbon” (Arp 1974: 355). The preoccupation that Arp termed “the problem of object-language” (Arp 1974: 339) gave rise to an original and highly inventive creative phase in which visual and verbal sign systems intertwine more closely than at any other point in his oeuvre.

The object-language, which Arp later dubbed his *Encyclopédie Arpadienne* [Arpadian Encyclopedia], deserves to be placed within a genealogy of attempts by writers to establish alternative taxonomies, to provide new definitions of words or to classify them according to unconventional, original or subversive criteria. Writers from Flaubert and Rimbaud to Ponge and Perec have produced texts that express fascination with the classification of words and their relationship to objects. In the visual arts, Henri Michaux, Christian Dotremont, Annette Messager, Ben Vautrier and others have explored language as a visual medium. Arp’s object-language is, first and foremost, pictorial, but relies on language in some crucial respects. Its best-known manifestations are the shallow reliefs he produced throughout the 1920s from painted wood and card and, towards the end of the decade, from string on canvas. His visual lexicon of navels, torsos, lips, clocks and other objects is banal, but their unexpected combinations, which rely heavily on language and the act of naming, anticipate the illogical encounters of Surrealism. As Arp (1974: 356) put it in *Encyclopédie Arpadienne*: “Young bearded column-navels, flowering and noisy, skip rope”.

Flying beaks and water-strings: the Dada poems

It has often been noted that the object-language represents a shift of emphasis in Arp’s creative trajectory that chimes with his move from Zurich to Paris and with the transition from Dada towards Surrealism. Indeed, after his Dada output – in turns geometric and biomorphic, but in both cases resolutely abstract – his object-based art of the early 1920s does make it easy to see why the future surrealists, largely distrustful of abstract art, were attracted to his work at the time. As some critics have speculated, Arp’s interest in objects may have been encouraged by his contact with the artistic community in the cafés of Paris. Certainly the fascination with the hallucinatory power of everyday objects was a central preoccupation of Surrealism, documented verbally by André Breton in his *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité* (1924) and many subsequent texts, and visually in the “Exposition surréaliste d’objets” at the Galerie Charles Ratton in 1936.

While the object-language was undoubtedly a form of Surrealism *avant la lettre*, we should be wary of assessing it as an entirely new departure for Arp, or as a response to his new-found acquaintances in Paris; after all, an acute sensitivity to the strangeness of things, and to the sheer arbitrariness of the names we give them, characterises the work he produced in Zurich during the Dada period. The object-language output thus deserves to be seen as a direct corollary of the Dada work rather than a move away from it. This relatedness is reflected in specific formal terms, especially in a shared emphasis on unusual groupings of objects or ideas which characterises the visual and verbal work of the 1910s and 1920s. His volumes of poems written in the 1910s already show the principles of the object-language at work: they abound with surprising pairings, in turns ludic and nightmarish, as their titles already forewarn us: *Die Wolkenpumpe* [The Cloud Pump], *Die Schwalbenhode* [The Swallow’s Testicle] and *Der Vogel Selbdritt* [The Bird Plus Three]. The poems themselves are peppered with unfamiliar, logic-defying configurations, associations, conflations and constructions. Their appeal to the Paris Dada group was clear: in 1920, extracts of all three collections appeared in the reviews *Littérature* and *391* in loose translations by Breton and Tzara. As these lines from *Die Wolkenpumpe* suggest, they depict apocalyptic, nightmarish visions whose individual elements are