CRYPTOGRAPHY AND ALCHEMY IN THE WORK OF MARCEL DUCHAMP AND WALTER ARENSBERG

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Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) was/is, according to the title belonging to one of the recent (1989) scholarly testaments to his legendary postmodernist fame, 'MARCEL DUCHAMP: ARTIST OF THE CENTURY'. Anything but a true believer, and perhaps more like a postmodernist iconoclast, for some time I have been preparing a monographic study examining in considerable detail just how the now endlessly discussed art of Marcel Duchamp was consistently based on traditional esoteric systems which were themselves scarcely "modern" for being largely, and very conventionally, "hermetic" in nature, often directly so. In order to make my case credible—for the occultist-alchemical issue is very controversial in Duchamp scholarship—in a recent publication I went even further, listing any number of esoteric publications, including many specifically hermetic-alchemical texts, which were directly accessible to Duchamp during his two-year, 1913-1915, tenure as a librarian at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris. Now I would like to consider a related issue, which (oddly) is never sufficiently emphasized in the copiously published Duchamp scholarship, namely the generally occult, and often specifically hermetic, interests of Duchamp's foremost American patron, Walter

1 In this case, the reference is to Kuenzli and Naumann, Marcel Duchamp: Artist of the Century; see also Shipe, 'Marcel Duchamp: A Selective Bibliography'. For something like the documentary history of a nearly unprecedented art-historical apotheosis of MD, ca. 1960—ca. 1995, see Jones, Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp; see esp. chapters 2, 3: 'Duchamp as Generative Patriarch of American Postmodernists'; 'The Living Author-Function: Duchamp's Authority'.

2 See Moffitt, 'An Emblematic Alchemical Source for Duchamp's "Large Glass"'; 'Hermeticism in the Art of the Fourth Dimension'; 'Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant-Garde'; 'Marcel Duchamp, la emblemática alquímica, y el Atlántica Fugiens'; 'Marcel Duchamp's Étant donnés: How Walter Arensberg Explained its Alchemical Iconography'; 'Hermeticism in Jules Laforgue's Encore à cet astre: A Symbolist Alchemical Scenario for Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase'.

3 Most notable (or notorious) among the other students of Duchamp's alchemical scenarios are (besides Moffitt, as in n. 2): Burham, Great Western Saltworks; Calvesi, Duchamp Invisibile; Golding, Marcel Duchamp; Linde, 'L'ésotérique'; Schwarz, Complete Works; for an overview of the earlier alchemical interpretations (listing even more entries), see also Clair, 'La fortune critique de Marcel Duchamp'.

4 Moffitt, 'Fin-de-Siècle Parisian Hermeticism'.

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Conrad Arensberg (1878-1954), so showing another convergence of their ideas in esoteric pursuits⁵.

Fleeing from a war-torn European continent, Marcel Duchamp arrived in the port of New York on Tuesday, August 11, 1915. In a properly symbolic manner, in sweltering heat, Duchamp had landed on Columbus Day, celebrating the invention of primitive America by another great European discoverer-conqueror⁶. Duchamp was greeted on the pier by Walter Pach, who immediately brought the twenty-eight-year-old émigré artist to the apartment of Louise and Walter Arensberg⁷. The Arensbergs, who then lived at 33 West 67th Street, were to become Duchamp's most devoted patrons during his early years in America, which, in retrospect, turns out to have been by far the most significant period in his entire career. The unique oeuvre Duchamp produced for his enlightened New World patrons now enhances the unsurpassed Arensberg collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The most important individual "commission" among all these diverse works is, of course, the Large Glass (La Mariée mise à nu par les célibataires, même), which, in fact, Duchamp had been working on—in the form of notes and drawings—since around 1912. The Arensbergs created around themselves a coterie of artists that included some already major figures of the European avant-garde who had wisely sought refuge in neutral America. Besides Duchamp, there was Francis Picabia, Albert Gleizes (an early Cubist theoretician), the author Henri-Pierre

⁵ For another of these revelations, see Moffitt, ‘Marcel Duchamp’s Étant donné...’. For crucial details regarding the actual contents of Arensberg’s esoteric library, I am in great debt to Dr. Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (formerly consulting archivist of the Arensberg Archives in the Francis Bacon Library) and Alan Jutzi (Rare Book Dept., Huntington Library). Even though a complete catalogue of Arensberg’s books, most of which have only recently been transferred to the Huntington Library (San Marino, Calif.), is far from complete, Mr. Jutzi informs me that his initial survey reveals that Arensberg certainly did own an ‘extensive’ collection of publications specifically dealing with alchemy and hermeticism; besides modern divulgations, he had also acquired many original editions from the 17th century, among others, including Fludd and Kirchner. Prof. Sawelson-Gorse emphasizes however one’s difficulty in fixing the date for these acquisitions, and our only solid clues are citations in Arensberg’s publications, but these only provide a terminus ante quem.

⁶ For much further information regarding the mythic ‘inventions’ of America by numerous European visitors, welcome or otherwise and beginning late in 1492, see Moffitt and Sebastián, O Brave New People: The European Invention of the American Indian.

⁷ Some of this biographical data has been drawn from Gough-Cooper and Caumont, Ephemerides, and Plan pour écrire une vie de Marcel Duchamp, for nearly everything else pertinent to the Arensberg connection, see also Sawelson-Gorse, ‘Marcel Duchamp’s “Silent Guard”’. 