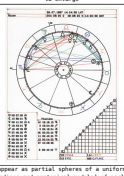
Duchamp’s Horoscope

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From a modern point of view, astrology and alchemy are early forms of our scientific thinking that are limited by superstition. To the historian they appear as partial spheres of a uniform or holistic take on the world. In recent times, it is surprising to note an aestheticizing return to the era of "Kunst – und Wunderkammern" [editor's note: a curious way in which art – often displayed from floor to ceiling – was exhibited alongside odd objects, scientific instruments, archeological findings and anatomical models] of early modern times. The exhibition, which was staged at great cost (around $15 million) and labor under the mystical title "7 Hills" at Berlin's Gropiusbau-Museum, entertains the thought of an encyclopedic sun within which the knowledge of our times is contained. It is true that while doing so, one risks losing one's level-headedness, but via a more artistic approach one might also gain a better understanding of the cosmos on a micro- as well as a macro-level. In view of the euphoria of natural scientists to simultaneously have deciphered the genome and the elementary particle, even winners of the Nobel prize talk about a new mysticism. The four letters of the DNA are supposedly nothing less than a re-formulation of the old four elements-fire, water, earth, air. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that 12 fermions exist in the standard model of the elementary particles. It might well be that man, always striving for more knowledge, can only project new versions of old prejudices, whose common structure lie in particular numbers.

The horoscope is the portrait of the planets in the ecliptic. It is a clock that, unlike ordinary time, is not restricted by the position of the Sun alone, but also takes into account other celestial bodies-from Mercury, located close to the Sun, to far away Pluto. These are astronomical facts; only with our belief in a possible interpretation of this constellation, ever-changes according to time and place, do we leave safe terrain and enter the realm of superstition of historical traditions.

The 12 signs of the zodiac are the projected combinations from the three areas (body, soul, spirit) and the four elements, which since C.G. Jung can also be understood as four functions (sense, feeling, thinking, will). Since the notions are not unequivocal and diverge in different languages, various possibilities of interpretation are always possible. One can thus designate the signs according to the system of the religious philosopher from Vienna, Arnold Keyserling, as follows: Aries: soul-will, Taurus: body-sense, Gemini: spirit-thinking, Cancer: soul-feeling, Leo: body-will, Virgo: spirit-sense, Libra: soul-thinking, Scorpio: body-feeling, Sagittarius: spirit-will, Capricorn: soul-sense, Aquarius: body-thinking, Pisces: spirit-feeling.

Within this cosmic human being, the planets create a structure that can be looked at as a sort of grammar. Jupiter would be the "and" of the language, which connects everything, Venus the noun, which is fixated upon the world of the object, etc. Each human being has all the components of such a systematic structure, a sort of ontology, different with each individual. But here, we shall not pursue further any ethical inclinations. In this sense, a horoscope can be anything-ranging from the "characteriologic" analysis to the representation of a course of life.

With all of our knowledge about Duchamp today, it does not make much sense to read Duchamp's horoscope retro-prophetically as a potential life. The record would constantly be set straight by biographical data. This a posteriori view would not be very interesting. What one could try to accomplish however, is to redraw the easily available course of his life by taking into account the most important data. What was really important to him? And how can one explain his ability to let the world in the dark about his work? Every "house" (indicated by Roman numericals), beginning with the ascendant to the left, lasts for seven years. That is, one moves first through one's own horoscope under the horizon, until, at the beginning of the 7th house (at the descendant right), one rises from the "night," and, with 42 years (6×7), one appears before the public. In their meaning, the individual houses adhere to the respective state of development; they are, however, present throughout the entire life (similar to the genetic code, which is nowadays given more credence to. It is true that it has been deciphered, but we are far from understanding it.) A horoscope discloses that missed opportunities can hardly be taken up again. Life goes on. One should not, for example, raise small children (5th house) when one is in the 9th house (older than 63 years). One is not always equally young or old; but everybody has the focal points of his or her development at another place, so that not even these statements should be generalized.

In the following, we will restrict ourselves to the indicated data. Such a reading will certainly be a very general one. Everybody who is interested in astrology can further spin it out. Accordingly, planet Venus in the 10th house in Virgo has manifold meanings within the frame of a certain spectrum. Here though, this will be reduced to one location, namely 19.43 degrees, that for MD is the year 1953. We will proceed in this manner with every planet, and we will also consider the place directly opposite, that is displaced by 180 degrees, in this case 1911. The point situated directly opposite to one's own location represents the complementary goal in one's horoscope.

The individual astrological traditions differ considerably with regards to the tolerance of the Aspects. These are the relations between the planets themselves. One can compare them with the relation between notes that blend together to more or less harmonious music. Generally, one assumes a tolerance of 10 degrees between the planets, between a planet and the Sun or the Moon respectively 12.30 degrees and between the Sun and the Moon 15 degrees. This may seem arbitrary, and it differs from other systems. Opposition and conjunction (0 or 180 degrees respectively + tolerance, yellow) are impulses that have to be controlled through Will; Square (90 degrees, red) is feeling; Sextile (60, 120 degrees, green) = Sense; semi-sextile and trigon (30, 150 degrees, blue) = Thought. Traditionally, green is considered to be positive, red to be negative. It can also be characteristic when two planets are not related through any Aspects.

Below, an abbreviated interpretive overview will be given, together with a record of the planets throughout MD's life. All the planets are located above the horizon. It is true that this is characteristic of a public life, yet it is also characteristic of a late fame. Usually, it is said that a horoscope, which does not enclose the center, is eccentric. Focal points are the 7th house (community, society), with Neptune in Taurus and Pluto in Gemini, as well as the 9th house (journey, ideas) with Saturn in Cancer, the Sun in Leo and Mercury in Leo, as well as the 11th house (friendships with the rich and famous, works) with Uranus and Jupiter in Libra. From the viewpoint of the Aspects, most of it is concentrated in the 9th house. This is why we are dealing with a person destined for (journeys and) ideas, and less with an artist in the traditional sense-the 2nd house (art, possession) is empty and in Taurus, we find only Neptune, that is acquaintances. Venus in the 10th house in Virgo is only connected through Aspects with 4 other planets. Venus occupies a prominent spot in the house of the public and has no negative Aspect. Since Venus is the creative force (and, from a mythological stance, the goddess of love), we could start analyzing her first, asking for the two corresponding moments.

Venus in Virgo in the 10th house: 1911 and 1953/4

During this year, Duchamp paints his most important paintings (family, nudes, chess) in Blainville. The long-term project refers to the passage from the "virgin" to the "Bride." The background or frame to these years (opposite the goal) is the sign of Virgo. As the one formative incident that enters with Venus one has to assume the wedding of his favorite sister Suzanne in August. The inaccessibility of the "bride" will later become a subject of the Large Glass. Almost exactly opposite, that is 42 years later, in the 10th house, the 66 year-old MD marries Alexina "Teeny" Matisse-Sattler in January of 1954. From the viewpoint of the Aspects, it was a harmonious event. MD nevertheless manages to portray himself publicly (10th house) as (male) virgin, as bachelor (Venus). Only years later MD found out by chance that he had become the father of a girl in 1911.

Moon in Scorpio in the 12th house: 1929

The female (the mother) is generally represented by the Moon. The Moon also stands for the changeable and for (in the 12th house) regenerating in seclusion. As one can see from the two squares in the 9th house to Mercury and the Sun, this iridescent seclusion clashed with the self-confident talk and his judgment of himself. Externally this became evident in the 41st year (1929) of his life. This does not concern his short marriage to Lydie Sarazin-Levassor since it was divorced just a year before. Henry McBride asked the question why, in view of the "fat" bride and her father's rather inadequate endowment, MD did not marry Kathy Dreier. At the crucial moment (1929), MD met up with her and her friend Mrs. Thayer to travel around Spain and Germany. Dreier saw in MD "another side of me." She was probably the most important woman in his life, gravely underestimated by his biographers, even though she did not understand all the ideas (squares in the 9th house) of her "adopted son." The opposition to Neptune in the 7th house brings forth the speculation that this friendship would not have faired too well with his other public acquaintances.

Neptune in Taurus in the 7th house: end of 1931 / beginning of 32

Except the already mentioned inclination to leave people in the dark about his relationships to women, MD obviously had many acquaintances (Neptune), which were not least (favorable Aspects in the 9th house) conducive to his journeys and ideas. In his vitae this talent manifested itself officially when he wrote a chess book together with Vitaly Halberstadt that was published in three languages during June of 1932 in Brussels. This cooperation must have been important for his since it is also the first planet he reaches in the horoscope (because so far the houses were empty and the other mentioned planets stood opposite).

Mars in Cancer in the 8th house: 1940

The ruler of nativity (the regent of the ascendant Scorpio) is on good terms with Venus and the Moon, but not so with Neptune. Next to the Sun, the ruler of nativity is often seen as the most important planet in a horoscope. Initiative as sublimated aggressiveness, the tendency to keep searching for the roots (Cancer), has to be accepted here as a principle. The square that points toward Uranus in the 11th house indicates the longing for the intellectual dealing with the work for which the foundation stone only is laid. In 1940, MD decides to start working on his private museum-on his Boîte-en-Valise. From 1941 on, MD will, little by little, put the samples of the edition together in seven series and publish them.

As mythological figure, Mars is naturally the god of war. Yet the German occupation of Arcachon, to where MD had retreated together with Mary Reynolds, his sister Suzanne and her second husband Jean Crotti, Salvador Dalí and his wife Gala, scarcely seemed to have bothered him.

Uranus in Libra in the 11th house: 1915/16 and 1957/58

MD has a balanced (Libra) intellectual-dialectic relationship (Uranus) to his friends (11th house) in society. The time during which his personality (Aries) is emphasized-from 1913 to 1922-is determined by the Ready-mades. When he arrives in New York as a twenty-seven-year-old, he becomes friends with the Arensbergs. Directly opposite, 42 years later, the occupation with his work takes place through dealings with the publishers of his writings, George Heard Hamilton and Michel Sanouillet. He also meets with his important biographer and interpreter, Robert Lebel.

Jupiter in Libra in the 11th house: 1921 and 1963

The second planet in this house of the lifework is Jupiter. Jupiter stands for the capability of synthesis. What is better to announce an oeuvre than bringing works together in a big personal exhibit? MD is already 76 years old and only now is he offered this exhibit in Pasadena. 42 years earlier, in the house of mastery (5th) of his personality (Aries), MD brings about this synthesis in a completely different way than in an accumulation of his works. Through his alter ego Rose Selavy he explores the female side of his personality. The integrative force of Jupiter can be rendered in many different ways. Particularly noteworthy is the big tension to the conjunction of the three planets gathered in the 9th house, that is, to his ideas.

Saturn, Sun, Mercury in the 9th house in Cancer and Leo: 1941-1946

This is a big emotional conflict. Saturn as Authority, the Sun as Being, and Mercury as rhetoric economy not only set up priorities of the entire horoscope-so to speak the culmination of all his efforts-but they also create a symbiosis of apparent crisis. MD is now generally perceived as authority (Saturn) or in his mastery (Mercury and the Sun in Leo). He is almost popular, in any case a legend. Not only does the magazine "VIEW" dedicate an issue to him, but the Large Glass also appears as prop for a fashion shoot on the cover of "VOGUE." There is an exhibit of the three Duchamp-brothers, etc. The squares from here to Jupiter and to the Moon display his yearning in two ways. On the one hand a longing for a synthesis of his oeuvre, which he realizes through the work on individual examples of the Boîte-en-Valise. On the other hand, it is evident through the fulfillment of his female side, namely in a sexual way (Moon in Scorpio) and through loneliness (Moon in 12th house). Of utter importance here is his liaison with a Brazilian artist and wife of an ambassador, Maria Martins, to whom he dedicates a personal "valise." The "faulty landscape" within is painted with ejaculate. Through this, one can grasp the ironic message of the proverbial bachelor, who "grinds his own chocolate." The speculation is permitted that similar things have happened 42 years before, directly opposite in the horoscope. His work will from now on be restructured. He moves into a new studio that he will use for the next 22 years, until the end of the sign of Libra. From now on, he will come up ,in this modest studio with the idea and realization of a sexualized, lonely woman (Moon in Scorpio in the 12th house), that is Etant donnés. The model for her body was Maria Martins, who soon was to disappear to Paris and Brazil, her native country. She became for MD the bedded Marie, in memory of the far-away Mariée.

Another chapter could be written on the allocation of cities. This differs, however, according to the various schools of astrology. We will restrict ourselves to note that New York as city of Neptune and Paris as city of Venus agree with the corresponding meanings in the 7th and 10th house.