ALCHEMY, PHOTOGRAPHY, SURREALISM, AND MYTH

1.

Around 60 BCE, with members of the Chinese aristocracy were ingesting a so-called Elixir of Immortality; prepared for them by court alchemists. But instead of prolonging their lives, these substances, such as cinnabar, the soft red ore we call mercury and they called “Dragon’s Blood,” many times proved fatal.

Thousands of years later, in America, there was a news story about how Silicon Valley billionaires are investing “in new biotechnologies that they hope will enable them to do what no human has ever done: cheat death. The technology includes some dubious treatments, such as being pumped with the blood of much younger people.”[1] The Dragon of Eternal Life lives on.

Meanwhile, there was another school, that of Chinese Daoist alchemy, in which one’s body is the vessel in which a Golden Elixir is made by opening various channels, the same ones used by acupuncturists, with techniques of visualization and “closed circuit respiration.”

As legend and writings of the psychologist C.G. Jung’ tell us, sometime in 1928, Jung received a copy of Richard Wilhelm’s translation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Jung was already familiar with another Daoist text, the *I-Ching; The Book of Changes.* But after reading *The Secret of the Golden Flower* Jung realized that “the alchemists were talking in symbols---those old acquaintances of mine.”[2]

Jung contributed an introduction to *The Secret of the Golden Flower,* and to similar texts. Using Daoism’s guidance of “the body being the vessel” enabled him to develop a Depth Psychology approach to alchemy for the West.

Marie-Louise von Franz, a member of Jung’s inner circle, wrote that the alchemists’ “conclusions are spontaneous uncorrected impressions of the unconscious with very little conscious interference, in contrast to other symbolic material which has always been revised.”[3] Von Franz could be describing early 20th Century Surrealism, which arose primarily in Europe after World War I with a manifesto by Andre Breton. Surrealism is a more-or-less spontaneous practice of projecting dreamed images directly into forms of painting, sculpture, poetry, or photography. While the alchemists transformed the elements within their apparatus, the surrealists projected their visions onto aestheticized spaces. Both worked in a language that was material and metaphorical, substantive and symbolic, and in all senses reflected the marvelous, a word that stems from “mirror.”

Randolph Severson wrote that “Many alchemists follow Maria Prophetissa in believing that the secret of the hermetic art was contained within the laboratory instruments rather

than in the chemical operation...Imagine the apparatus as if it were a microscope, telescope, camera or something of the kind."[4]

Let us imagine a camera as an alchemist's apparatus. What the alchemists did with elements surrealist photographers did with space: recontextualizing it as a mirror reflects an image.
The alchemists and surrealists shared a language that was both material and metaphorical, substantive, and symbolical.

Mirrors have been found in Ancient Egypt, prehistorical Peru, and the Shang Period in China, which began in 1600 BCE. Besides their use for seeing an image of oneself, they were used as portals into the spirit world. Alchemists as renowned as John Dee, mathematician, engineer, spymaster, and advisor to Queen Elizabeth 1, gazed into a crystal ball to call forth angels.
Writing on the Paleolithic caves in Southern Europe, anthropologist David Whitney pondered: "To the degree that these Paleolithic artists sought to touch the faces of the gods, they apparently looked into themselves to find their deities, not to the world around them. I wonder if, thirty thousand years later, we are really all that much different."[5]

The images in the cave at Lascaux have been dated to around 12,000 years ago. By some 37,000 years ago our Cro-Magnon ancestors had in the cave of Chauvet already developed techniques to project the illusion of animated images.
In 1878, the photographer Eadweard Muybridge set up twelve cameras with tripwires to see whether all of a horse's legs left the ground at the same time when it was running. (They do, momentarily.)

Thirty-nine years earlier, Louis Daguerre went public with his invention of the daguerreotype, the first known stable photographic technique. It was conducted by sensitizing a silvered plated copper sheet with vapors of iodine. The plate was then exposed to light through a camera's lens, creating a latent image which was later developed in an enclosed box over a dish of heated mercury that releases vapors which clung to the silver iodide and form an image. The image is then fixed by immersing the plate in an ordinary salt solution.

All these elements--silver, mercury, salt---used to create the daguerreotype were also used by the alchemists. As has been popularized, some alchemists strove to create gold, while contemporary chemists can bombard mercury with electrons which transmute it into a form of gold. However, only trace amounts of gold can be made this way, and the resultant gold is radioactive. But this at least demonstrates that those alchemists who dreamed of making gold weren't so crazy after all, they just didn't have the technology. Or, as it's been rumored, some of them may have succeeded small amounts of gold, and not radioactive.

Indeed, what seems to have drawn Jung to alchemy is that, unlike chemistry, that appealed to him as a scientist, alchemy has an irrational side that appealed to him as an artist, even though he refused to admit that he was one. The conflict between the rational and irrational, the scientist and the artist, I suggest is the fulcrum of Jung's contribution to psychology.

While alchemists faced the danger of their apparatus leaking and poisoning them, or the fire in their furnace getting out of control and the Great Work exploding, surrealists could go mad if their hellfire, the *ignis gehennalis* of their unconscious, were released into their art. Photographers could also become mad enclosed in a darkroom watching images magically appear from beneath the acrid lake of chemicals.

2.

Noxious fumes, horned demons, exploding apparatus, toxic fumes in dark rooms, all call forth the Sumerian myth of "Inanna's Descent into the Underworld."

Perhaps the structure of journeys into the Underworld, such as with Inanna, goes as far back as the Upper Paleolithic, when the Underworld was found in caves whose walls were, "thought to be the thin and permeable veil between the sacred and the mundane, one that the shaman penetrated on his supernatural excursions."

What we do know is that "Inanna's Descent into the Underworld," was carved into stone tablets around 4000 years ago by an unknown Sumerian artist. Here's the basic story:

One day Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Goddess of Light, suddenly decided that she must visit the Underworld ruled by the Queen of Darkness and Death, who was Inanna's elder sister and sworn enemy. We are not told why she decided to put herself in such danger, except that even the gods must go through additional initiations; or, as Jung put it, with reference to alchemy, "additional distillations."

Not trusting her sister with her life, Inanna sent her faithful servant Ninshubur to plead with the gods to use their influence to make sure she returns home alive. Meanwhile, the goddess put on her finest robes and jewels, and began the hazardous journey downward; or, as we would say, inward.

Arriving at the gates to the Underworld, Inanna encounters Neti, the Underworld's gatekeeper, or chief butler, who asks her why she wants to take "the road / From which no traveler returns." She tells him that she's there to attend the funeral rites for her sister's husband. Neti tells her to wait while he confers with his queen.

While she waits, let's segue to a time when there was a long interruption between exposure of photographic film and the printing of a positive image.
In 1900, when the popular Kodak Brownie camera was introduced (it cost $1.00), the exposed rolls of film were taken to a store who sent to a laboratory to be developed. It could take a week or more before the results were received. Soon after World War II, the Polaroid Land Camera, which developed film internally in about one minute, became

available. Presently, with digital cameras pictures appear instantaneously. But a myth still takes time to develop.

Thus, hearing that her sister Inanna wants to visit her, the Queen of Darkness instructs Neti to open the seven gates to the Underworld, one by one, and let her sister pass through. (George Ripley wrote of “twelve gates through which the alchemist enters the ‘castle’ of the Great Work. He lists these as calcination, solution, separation, conjunction, putrefaction, congelation, cibation (which means feeding of a substance that’s in a flask) sublimation, fermentation, exaltation, multiplication and projection.”) However, at each gate Inanna must remove another of her royal garments, until she arrives kneeling before her sister naked. (Jung comments that, “Undressing symbolizes the extraction of the soul.”)

Naked and venerable, the judges of the Underworld surrounded Inanna and pronounce her guilty for entering the realm of death while still alive.

Then the Queen of Darkness fastened the Eye of Death onto her sister, and suspended her on a hook. (Here the image is clearly one of initiation, such as the Norse god Odin, who hung for nine days and nights on the “World Tree.” Or the Christian god, who was also bound to the wood of a tree. Both gods were also wounded. Christ remained dead for three days, which is the same amount of time Inanna would remain deceased.)

Meanwhile, Inanna’s servant, pleading with the gods for her mistress’s safe return to life, was receiving rejection after rejection---until she arrived at the shrine of Innana’s father, where she implored: “O Father Enki, do not let your daughter / Be put to death in the underworld. / Do not let your bright silver / Be covered with the dust of the underworld.” (Silver, again, the element that prepared the daguerreotype’s black surface to receive the light that would make a permanent image.)

Like any concerned father, Enki replied, “What has my daughter done now?” Enki is associated with deep listening; so that after realizing why Inanna had to perform this dangerous task, he brought forth from under a fingernail of both his left and right hands the same earth of which Adam was made, and from which the 16th century Rabbi Judah Loew fashioned a golem, the earth that is also the alchemist’s *prima materia*, Enki made from this earth two creatures, “neither male nor female.” To one he gave the Food of Life, and to the other the Water of Life, and sent them on a mission to rescue his daughter.

After tricking the Queen of Death into giving them Inanna’s corpse, Enki’s agents revived her, and were about to ascend when the judges demanded that someone be delivered to them in her place. (Here, perhaps, is the origin of the hostage scenario.)

Inanna had left her husband behind to temporarily be the supreme ruler of Sumer. So she chose him to take her place in the Underworld; first, to strip him of his power; second, for him to undergo the initiation she had just completed. But he too terrified to go; so his sister volunteered to take his place in Hades for half of each year.

In all these myths there is initiation in the Underworld; that is, the unconscious, where the songs of bards, the visions of mystics, the work of artists “tempt…madness by mimicking its symptoms,” as art historian James Elkins wrote.[6]

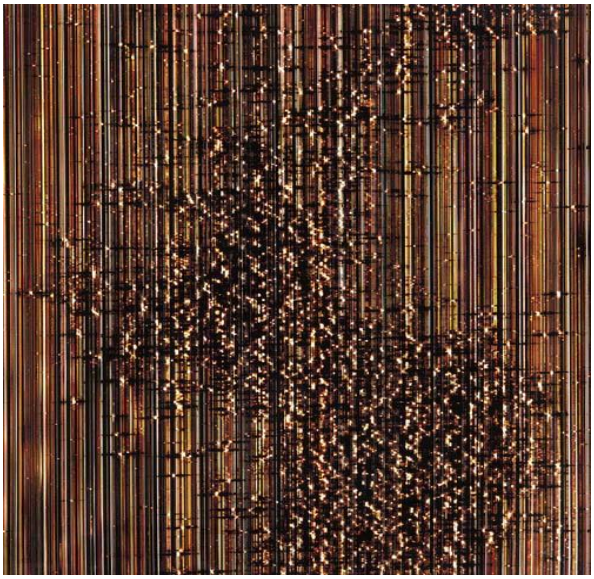
3.

Madness returns us to the Surrealists. Mary Ann Caws, a major scholar of French literature, and surrealism in particular, wrote that “the surrealist image to provoke us out of our passivity it must have a strength greater than the mere comparison of two similar things. It gathers its peculiar intensity from an interior contradiction powerful enough to free the image from banal ways of judging familiar phenomena.”[7]

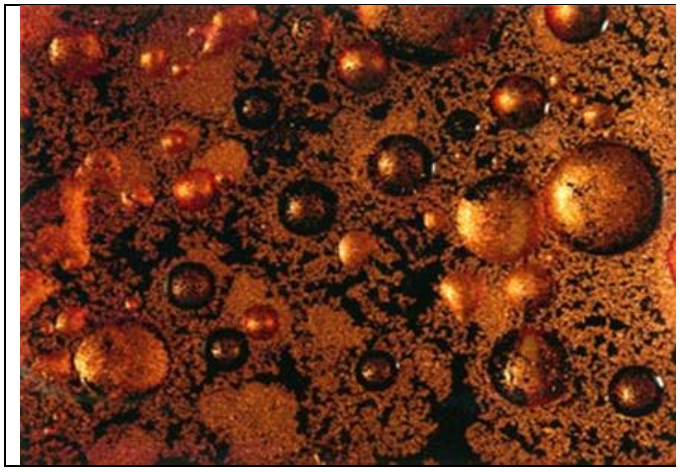
Man Ray, born Emmanuel Radnitzky in 1890, in Philadelphia (the city in whose museum the tablets of Inanna’s Descent were rediscovered), grew up in Brooklyn but moved to Paris in 1921, where he died in 1976.
His most famous photograph is of a sleeping woman whose dream materializes in front of her as a mask from the Ivory Coast of Africa in the relative shape of her face. This picture, titled, in English, “Black and White,” is of Kiki, the famous French model and “flamboyant nightclub personality.” First appearing in the May 1926 French edition of the fashion magazine *Vogue*, its original title was “Mother-of-Pearl Face and Ebony Mask.” This photograph is an example of how a piece of work meant to be commercial can, by its innate genius, become iconic to “high” art.

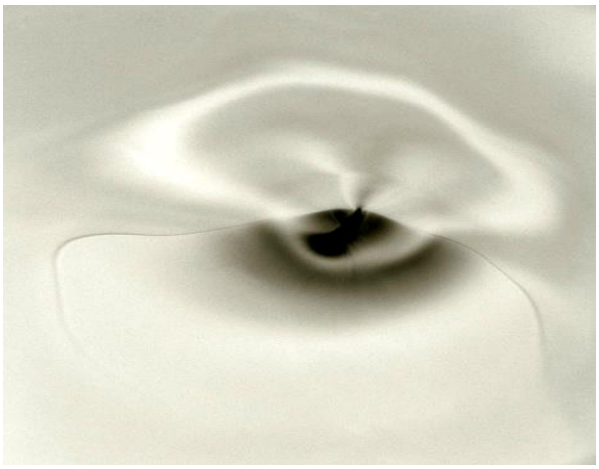
Contemporary photography has many different technical approaches (besides the digital, which advances, not depreciates, illusionistic representations, such as we see with so-called “deep fake” pictures).
One example is of a gifted technician is Joel-Peter Witkin, who during the 1980s was the second-best selling photographer in the world, the first being Richard Avedon. Witkin’s images “are endowed with truthfulness because of the camera’s ‘privileged connection to the real,’ though his content is filtered through a stylized transparent technique.” This in includes scratching the negatives and overlaying tissue on the photographic paper during printing. By using “grotesque figures” in gothic tableaus, Witkin’s images “exercise the same moral power as much as medieval art.”

Perhaps in reaction to the automation of digital photography, there is a movement among some contemporary photographers to shun, or at least partially shun, the camera in favor of using, for example, light-sensitized paper to capture uninhibited photons. One example is the German photographer Marco Breuer, who has "'subjected photographic paper to shotguns, one-time flashbulbs, modified turntables, razor blades, and power sanders, among other tools..."[8]



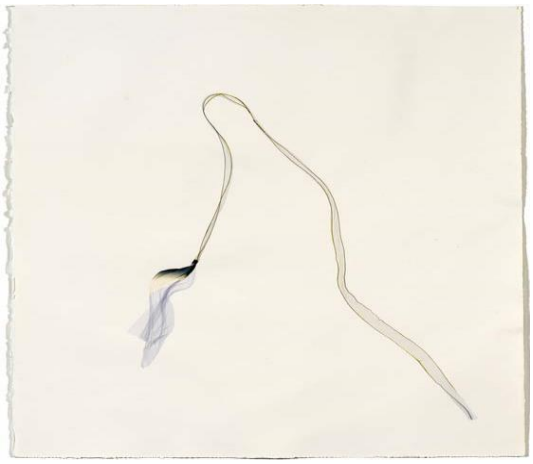
Another of these innovators is the Italian photographer Beatrice Pedoconi, who introduces substances, such as oil paints, or food such as eggs, into water, and then photographs the whorls, and worlds, of the colors with a large format Polaroid camera. She also creates video presentations.





At the beginning of this year Pedoconi had a show in Rome at which she showed work that, she explains, “is the result of a drawing process meant to physically express loss. These drawings are the result of a migration, and their volatile and minimal traces are the sole witnesses to a story.

“These same signs—markers of an empty space—become testaments to a trace, to memories of a past that has since been transformed. They hold an intimate account in which those memories, laid bare, welcome the vestiges of an existence that reveals itself in all its fragility.
Loss, mutation, fragment, trace…tell the story of a journey — both personal and collective — in which the ineffability of memory and of the past brings us back to the most essential elements.”[9]



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Endnotes

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