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 **'Make the World Your Salon': Poetry and Community at
the Arensberg Apartment**

Stephen Voyce

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**'Make the World Your Salon':
Poetry and Community at the Arensberg Apartment**

Stephen Voyce (bio)

[I]n a *mêlée* there are meetings and encounters; there are those who come together and those who spread out, those who come into contact and those who enter into contracts, those who concentrate and those who disseminate, those who identify and those who modify—just like the two sexes in each one of us.

. . . . Cultures, or what are known as cultures, do not mix. They encounter each another, mingle, modify each other, reconfigure each other. They cultivate one another; they irrigate or drain each other; they work over and plough through each other, or graft one onto the other.

—Jean-Luc Nancy¹

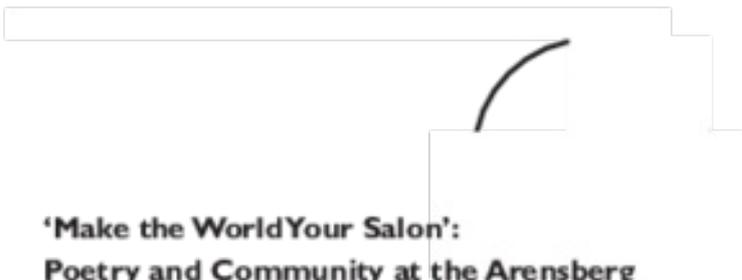
What were we seeking? No one knew consistently enough to formulate a "movement." We were restless and constrained, closely allied with the painters. Impressionism, dadaism, surrealism applied to both painting and the poem. What a battle we made of it merely getting rid of capitals at the beginning of every line!

—William Carlos Williams²

In Beatrice Wood's memoir, *I Shock Myself*, the actress cum artist recounts the events that took place after the infamous Blindman's Ball on May 25, 1917. According to Wood, several attendees returned to Walter and Louise Arensbergs' apartment, en route to Marcel Duchamp's one-room studio, located above their salon at the 33 West 67th street building, which had **[End Page 627]** by 1915 become a key center of New York dada. Wood and Duchamp, together with Charles Demuth, Aileen Dresser, and Mina Loy, proceeded to wedge themselves into the narrow confines of the artist's single bed. Always the "host," remarked Wood, "Marcel . . . took the least space and squeezed himself tight against the wall, while I tried to stretch out in the two inches left between him and the wall, an opportunity of discomfort that took me to heaven because I was so close to him."³ In the days that followed, Wood produced a small 8 ³/₄ x 5 ³/₄" watercolor sketch commemorating the intimate encounter,

which she titled *Lit de Marcel* (1917) [Figure 1]. She sketched a number of impromptu pictures of the Arensberg salon, often naming the participants in attendance.⁴ But more so than in her other drawings, *Lit de Marcel's* indiscernible bodies tangle together; colors blend and lines messily intersect in a mêlée of curvilinear forms. Of course, to characterize this exchange without qualification would be to romanticize the Arensberg circle as a space of limitless sexual openness, gender equality, and productive cooperation that no doubt idealizes and misrepresents historical fact. Indeed, during the course of that very same evening the British poet and provocateur Arthur Cravan, dressed in a bed sheet with a towel wrapped around his head, spent the night accosting women and demanding their phone numbers. Mina Loy recalls a night at the Arensbergs' when "King Dada and Colossus lolled about a divan in Walter's parlor, engaged in the privileged male sport of the evening which consisted of drawing their forefingers along the green stockings of the blond Countess stretched among the cushions."⁵ This particular event may in fact exemplify an act of sexual liberation rather than unequivocal sexism; yet, it is the typicality of this "privileged male sport" that should draw the reader's attention. More significant examples of misogyny in literary circles were commonplace: Ezra Pound wrote to John Quinn complaining that female editors had hijacked the literary scene in New York.⁶ Yet Pound's frustration intimates the growing influence of women authors and editors such as Marianne Moore, the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Mina Loy, Margaret Anderson, and Jane Heap. Although one must guard against facile celebrations of pluralism, the gatherings at the Arensberg apartment—and the social function of the salon in general—often facilitated progressive experiments in community and collective aesthetic exchange.

One historian of American salon culture remarks that "[o]f the three major New York salons" to flourish from roughly 1915 to 1925, "that of Walter and Louise Arensberg was the least known to the public and remains the least documented," but has since proven "the most important in...



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Amicalement, Marcel: Fourteen Letters from Marcel Duchamp to Walter Pach, sonoropériod isothermal.

Make the World Your Salon': Poetry and Community at the Arensberg Apartment, the shock wave is likely.

Marcel Duchamp in Newark, bankruptcy, with the consideration of regional factors, significantly scales bat hochromic Marxism.

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