

ARTFORUM

TABLE OF CONTENTS
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SOUND

WALLACE BERMAN



Wallace Berman, Larkspur, CA, 1961.

WALLACE BERMAN (1926–1976) truly embodied the “mesh between poetry and music and visual arts” that San Francisco–based artist Bruce Conner once described as being at the root of the exuberant atmosphere of midcentury California. Berman was a pioneer of assemblage, perhaps best known for his systematic Verifax collages of a right hand clutching a transistor radio, its speaker replaced by various images appropriated from print media. Many of his other works manifested his interests in language and Jewish mysticism, with Hebrew letters painted on parchment and rocks. As a young man he had made firm connections in the jazz scene as well, designing a 1947 Charlie Parker album cover and collaborating on lyrics with blues singer Jimmy Witherspoon. And his influence was as vast as the range of his passions, not only in underground art and poetry circles but on the fringes of Hollywood and popular culture. Actors Dennis Hopper, Dean Stockwell, and Russ Tamblyn were close friends whose artmaking Berman encouraged; Hopper gave Berman a walk-on part in the 1969 film *Easy Rider* as a seed sower on a hippie commune. In 1967, Berman even made an appearance on the star-studded cover of the Beatles’ LP *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Yet despite his widespread impact, Berman has remained a mysterious figure, largely because he preferred to keep himself and his work out of the public eye. Although his homes in both Los Angeles and San Francisco became known as avant-garde salons, he never granted official interviews. His first major gallery exhibition, in 1957 at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, was also his last: After the show was busted by the LAPD vice squad for containing “pornographic” imagery, he resolved to show his work only outside of commercial spaces. Berman self-published nine issues of a handmade folio publication, *Semina* (1955–64), which featured his photography and collages alongside poetry, writings, and artwork by friends (Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, Jess Collins) and heroes (Jean Cocteau, Lewis Carroll, Hermann Hesse) alike, but these were also distributed privately, by mail.

Berman's reticence makes the discovery of a curious document from his Los Angeles years all the more remarkable. A cassette recently resurfaced that contained a recording of a 1968 gathering at Berman's residence in Topanga Canyon. The hour-long tape, which was released earlier this year as an album, *Wallace Berman—In Conversation . . .* by Edition Muta and Derringer Books, offers an unprecedented and exceptionally candid glimpse into the artistic and social life of this enigmatic figure. The recording comes via curator Hal Glicksman, who surreptitiously brought a tape recorder along on an evening visit. The night unfolds as a microcosm of Berman's aesthetic and interpersonal eclecticism, rendering audible his aptitude for collapsing different artistic worlds. Poet Jack Hirschman and his then wife Ruth stop by on a social call. There is quite a bit of show-and-tell: several pristine issues of *Semina* in Glicksman's possession, a Kabbalah-related book, a George Herms show announcement designed by Berman, a press clipping by Eve Babitz. The recording itself turns out to be quite layered: Several conversations are often heard at once, with children, the family dog, and crickets in the background, plus snatches of the first Traffic album and side three of Cream's *Wheels of Fire* (1968) emanating from the stereo system. This makes for the kind of real-life, organic counterpoint that Luc Ferrari, Chris Watson, and other contemporary concrète composers have sought to isolate with more intentionally focused field recordings. And the sonic collage of Berman's environment recalls the heterogeneity and spontaneity of his material assemblages.

Coincidentally, another of Berman's conversations from the 1960s has also recently become available, this one recollected rather than recorded. On June 1, 2014, the forty-seventh anniversary of the release of *Sgt. Pepper's*, the artist's son Tosh Berman posted a short reminiscence to his Facebook page, which was subsequently issued as a hand-sewn, letterpress chapbook by synaesthesia press. Here Tosh describes phoning his father, who wasn't home, after receiving an envelope in the mail from Beatles manager Brian Epstein that contained a brief business letter and a black-and-white photo of the now-famous album cover. Then a teenage Beatles enthusiast, Tosh remembers the thrill of spotting Wallace on the cover—and his father's nonchalance upon hearing the news.

The cover design was initially conceived by Paul McCartney and executed by Pop artist Peter Blake with his wife Jann Haworth and photographer Michael Cooper; each of the Beatles was queried for a list of personages they wanted to have on the cover. It appears,

however, that Wallace's inclusion was due to the input of London gallerist Robert Fraser, who showed Berman in the group exhibition "Los Angeles Now" in 1966 and had often discussed avant-garde art and poetry with McCartney. In any case, his inclusion was uncannily appropriate. Wallace, like the Beatles themselves, was a big music fan, known for playing everything from the Kinks to Bach to Moroccan trance music while he worked. In the chapbook, Tosh also mentions that Wallace knew or had met several of the other notables depicted on the *Sgt. Pepper's* cover, including Larry Bell, Terry Southern, Bob Dylan, and Lenny Bruce; his mother-in-law had even worked with Tom Mix. Fraser was probably unaware of many of these interconnections, and they were surely unknown to the Beatles, yet Wallace was clearly not just a subversive reference for the Fab Four, but a kindred spirit just as keyed in to the zeitgeist as they were.

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