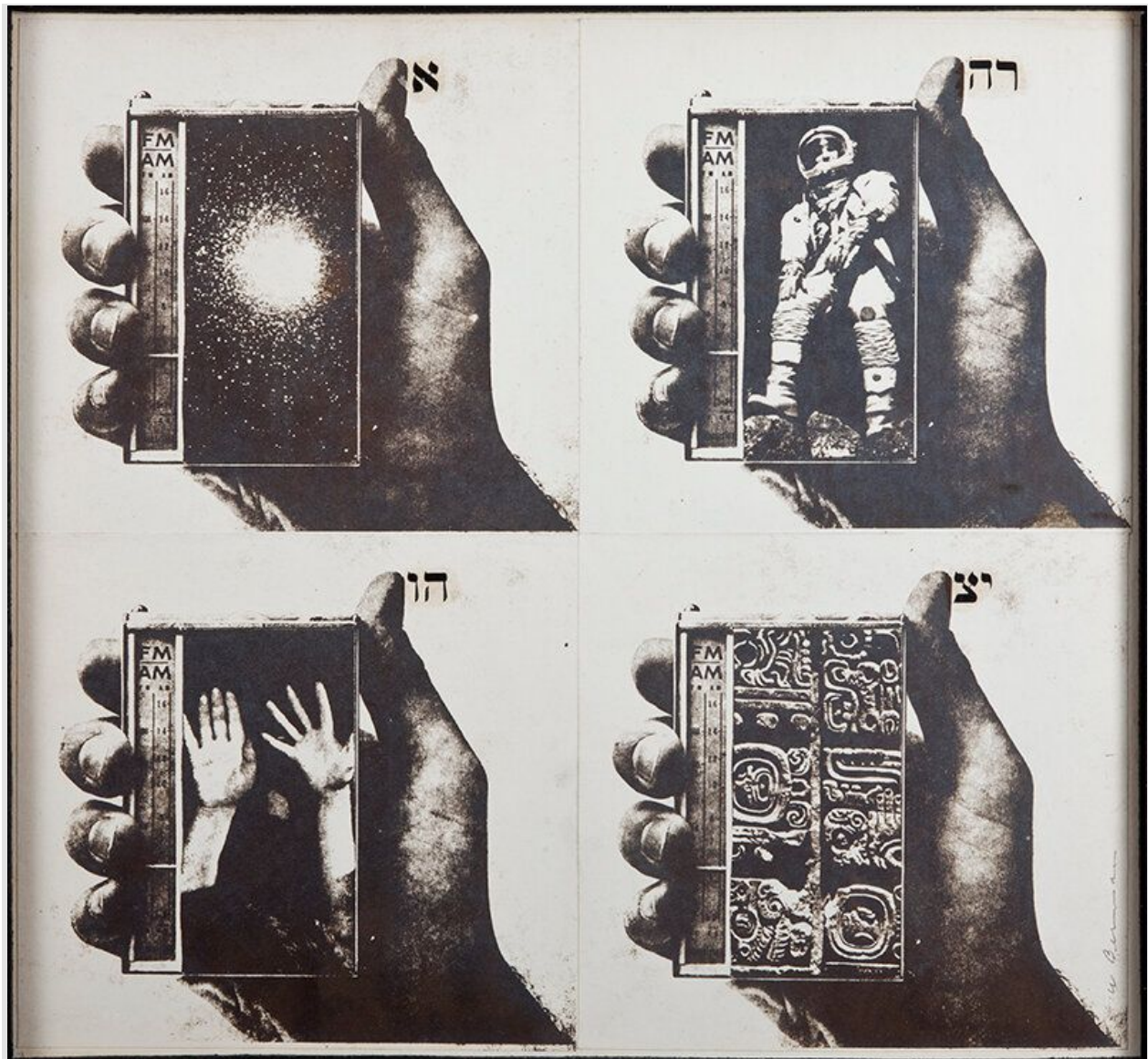


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Wallace Berman, *Untitled*, 1964-76. 4-part positive verifax collage, 13 × 14 inches. Courtesy Totah

Wallace Berman

Off the Grid

TOTAH

183 Stanton Street

New York

Lower East Side

Sep 8th — Oct 30th

By the time Wallace Berman arrived at his most significant aesthetic development, the artist had given up showing his work in public. In 1957, Berman had had his first exhibition at Los Angeles' prestigious Ferus Gallery, where he showed collages and sculptures that Merrill Greene described in *Artforum* as constituting "a richly syncretic language of belonging built upon a concentrated awareness of labyrinthine word systems, time systems and the actualities of process, emphasizing exquisite surfaces and tough moral contents."

That first show was also Berman's last for more than 20 years. He was arrested on charges of pornography—although L.A.'s vice squad had actually been called on Marjorie Cameron, one of Berman's works featured a blowjob and he subsequently took the fall—and had to be bailed out of jail by Dean Stockwell. That would be enough to disillusion even a stalwartly exhibiting artist, but the zoot suit-wearing Berman—an inveterate gambler who was born on Staten Island, grew up in Boyle Heights, and was chummy with Charlie Parker and other bebop musicians—already had a preference for the margins.

Berman was best-known as the publisher, editor and primary contributor of *Semina*, an underground, handmade art and poetry journal that doubled as an early work of mail art. Then, in the late 1950s, the first AM/FM transistor radios hit the United States market and Berman came across an ad featuring the portable device held prominently in someone's hand. He recognized the image as an icon and a portal—and it subsequently became the foundation of a series of collages that he began in 1960 and continued making until his death. Using a Verifax machine that he had inherited via a studio, he replaced the radio's facade with all sorts of images—psilocybin mushrooms, eagles, iron crosses, ancient Egyptian and Mayan reliefs, stills from pornos, the lunar surface and beyond—

arranging them like psychedelic typologies. Andy Warhol used to visit Berman's studio, taking in everything. In 1962 that icon of Pop art had his own exhibition at Ferus Gallery in which he debuted a series of prints depicting, ad nauseam, Campbell's Soup cans. Make of that what you will, but the gallerist David Totah takes it to mean that Wally Berman—not Warhol—actually invented “the grid.”

Totah's current exhibition, “Off the Grid,” is the largest show of Berman's work in decades. Featuring about 45 collages and one film, it's as robust as it can be without including works from the community that Berman cultivated and inspired—if not directly led. Berman was one of those once-in-a-generation artists who managed to be both under-known and extraordinarily impactful: His influence was limited to a small circle of admirers—but what a circle it was. His L.A. residences also served as headquarters for one of the city's most significant salons, hosting Jack Kerouac, Walter Hopps, Allen Ginsberg as well as Robert Duncan and Jess Collins. Along with Dean Cassidy, Berman helped morph the beatniks into hippies, yet his influence also extended into jazz, Pop art, American Surrealism, assemblage and so much more. Berman regularly corresponded with fellow mystic Hermann Hesse, but their letters were destroyed when Berman's house collapsed in a mudslide in 1965. “He had a prophetic aura, like a shamanic figure,” Totah says. “That's why people were drawn to him—he gave them the feeling that anything was possible.”

After his run-in with the L.A. Vice, whenever Berman or his work broke into the zeitgeist, he was decidedly blasé. When Berman's son, Tosh, called to tell his father that he was pictured on the cover of The Beatles's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), the artist was unimpressed. Legend has it that Berman only gave one interview in his lifetime, then kidnapped

the reporter and stole back the tape. If you wanted to see Berman's work while he was alive, you had to visit him at home: Berman would project *Aleph* (1958–66), a 16-mm film, onto his refrigerator. Anthology Film Archives painstakingly restored the footage—in places, it had been held together by tape—for Totah's exhibition. It's displayed in the basement, recalling Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Aleph," in which the entire universe is visible from a specific point in a minor poet's cellar. Berman saw the Kabbalah as a Judaic equivalent to jazz, in that its expression was indistinct from its conception, and he considered the Semitic letter *aleph*, which stands for primordial chaos, to represent "the all-encompassing man." His film cuts silently and schizophrenically between dancers, the pope, porn, someone shooting smack, scenes from *Flash Gordon*, Berman's Verifax works, a hand that opens in a burst, flying doves, a naked woman lighting a cigarette and much, much more.

By January 1966, not even *Artforum*—then based briefly in Los Angeles and arguably attuned to the West Coast—could avoid knowing of Berman, and he was given the cover. Two years later came his second ever exhibition, what was supposed to be a mid-career survey at New York's Jewish Museum if not for the fact that on February 18, 1976, his 50th birthday, Berman was struck by a drunk driver and killed—exactly when, as a child, he predicted he'd die. In 1978, Berman had his most recent show in New York: a survey at the Whitney Museum. Because of the 1965 mudslide, which destroyed years' worth of his art, Berman has less extant work than, say, his friend Bruce Connor. But if Totah's show illustrates one thing, it's that Berman is no less deserving of a critical revival. —*Will Fenstermaker*