ARTFORUM

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PRINT FEBRUARY 1978

WALLACE BERMAN: PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN UNDERGROUND MAN

A young man arrived at the door to Wallace Berman's Topanga Canyon home looking for the center of the Earth. Someone had told him, he claimed, that Wallace Berman's house was the center of the Earth and he'd come from England to find it.[1]

IT WAS FROM WALTER HOPPS that I first heard about Wallace Berman, and it was in the context of Los Angeles in the 1950s and not San Francisco, the mecca where most everyone thought that everything, but daddy everything, happened. What was happening in Los Angeles around 1955 was important, although there were very few so willing as Walter Hopps to pass over what conventionally was assumed to have a future, and to assign seemingly disproportionate historical significance to the intimate and funky revolutions taking place all over L.A.

When I met Berman, I encountered a small man with long hair who looked marvelously like a cross between a Hebrew patriarch and an Indian chief; during that meeting, I enjoyed what I regarded as an encounter with mystery. Only now is it apparent that I was but the most recent addition to a history of persons, many of whom were functioning outside the established social order and all of whom considered Wallace a presence out of the ordinary.

That some thought of him as a guru was, Wallace presumed, their problem: those who could view matters from Berman's perspective found that kind of presumptuous spirituality almost entirely lacking. Marcel Duchamp had been directed toward a similar locus: "If I have ever practiced alchemy, it was in the only way it can be done now, that is to say, without knowing it."[2]

The poet David Meltzer, in a letter to Wallace published in *Ragas* (1959), touched on the sense of openness to change which characterized Wallace's activities as a poet, artist, filmmaker, editor, photographer and "mandarin," reflecting a vocabulary of images recurrent in Berman's work:

No hope in making, assembling, binding together ornate bibles of history. The clues are found everywhere: outside the printed word; inside the sleeping poet; on the streets; beneath the sea; in levels, stratum, the years of a desert; and aurora around all the dead we bury within ourselves.

Reconsider the wind that moves flags, touches tents: an invisible snake running thru the grass.

Reconsider poems taken up by the wind, carried into the sky as clouds. Shadows of men (Time) bend backwards, disappearing.

To grow, the plant considers feet, eyes, the brush. A poem challenges nothing. Bends with the wind. A leaf, the stalk—flexible.[3]

Wallace frequently used as a kind of personal logo the calligraphic emblem *Aleph*, the symbol in cabalistic lore for the primordial chaos. By linking it to his own acute sense of mortality, Berman saw *Aleph* as meaning "the all-encompassing man," and this is how he

thought of himself. His acceptance of metaphor as an absolutely real, often desirable mode of thought and action complemented his insistent advocacy of an art of *essential use*, by which he meant not only the employment of all means and materials available regardless of origin and previous function, but also a deployment of his own energies toward the *retaking of mystery*. This Wallace did knowingly, in moments of his choosing and, in so doing, acted as *magician*.

Wallace understood very clearly that there were not many chances left to make use of the morality of human scale as a practical reality, not as a parody of some bygone age. He addressed himself as an artist to the exigencies of human lives, rather than appealing to the aggregate of meanings surrounding the title "artist" to remove himself into spheres of pure idea, away from encounters with the tangible and violent extremes of physical and emotional contact.

In a sense, Wallace's obscurity beyond a small circle of admirers was due partly to his own decision to show his work on a strictly personal basis. Although a major portion of Berman's work has been lost or destroyed, there remains to be traced a vast network of correspondence among a global circle of friends and acquaintances. These communications, frequently more visual than verbal in nature, exemplify precisely the way in which Wallace viewed his responsibilities as an individual and an artist *in communitas*; they bear a lovely and, I think, useful relationship to the poet Frank O'Hara's "Manifesto" on Personism.[4] O'Hara and Berman shared another approach to their work. Wallace did not believe that art was about solving problems, his own or anyone else's. Neither one engaged in art-oriented missionary work with intent to uplift or improve the viewer.[5]

Berman was adamantly silent on why he made art, how he made it, or what it all meant. To my knowledge, he never gave a formal interview. Certainly in our "discussions," the tape recorder remained unused. Although recalling my initial discomfort at his prolonged silences, I realize now that my phrasing of questions had nothing to do with the infrequency of his answers, their vagueness and economy of language. Had I been Walter Cronkite, nothing would have changed. Somehow, this was evidence to me of Wallace's unbelievable lack of prejudice.

I remember asking him one of many boring if dutiful questions: "Where were you born?" For several rounds he acted as if he hadn't heard. Then, graciously, he revealed that he didn't see what that had to do with anything, let alone art. Only eventually did he come forth with "Tompkinsville." "Tompkinsville, where?" He smiled and refused to say. It took another year to learn that Wallace's father had owned a candy factory on Staten Island. It now rests at Wallace Berman, born February 18, 1926, on Staten Island.

Berman was always amused, and occasionally annoyed, at "critic-morticians'" efforts at autopsying the work and at attempts to pigeonhole his life-style. In one of his letters to poet Zack Walsh, he says: "Enclosed is mag just released with photo of (wife) Shirl & i & (poet) Kirby Doyle . . . —Can yr lawyer sue? The article says we are in a Village coffee shop I've never been to N.Y. Also we are insulted . . . being in a mag that says on the cover 'The Mafia: America's First Line of Defense' and o so many other personal insults. . . ,"[6] In another letter: This photo . . . was taken four years ago in Los Angeles. . . . Here is the photo in a Washington, D.C. newspaper as a Beatnik. . . . I have never signed any type of release or given permission for the published shots—Can your lawyer do anything??"[7] Wallace proceeded with his life on the primary assumption that all experiences were justifiable grounds for art; what was finally important was *adventure* and not achievement.

It is important to know that Wallace thought of himself as a gambler and a broker. His fascination with games of every sort—with facades and meanings hidden from view, with the self-generation of myth—predates the self-conscious beginnings of his career as an artist. He grew up in the various Jewish ghettos of Los Angeles amidst the fragmentation and discontent epidemic in that city during and after World War II, the son of a "free-thinking" father who died when Wallace was nine or ten, leaving him a volume of Oscar Wilde and a copy of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T.E. Lawrence.

The poverty and prolonged illness enveloping Wallace as a child encouraged in him a rich imaginary life. The painter Richards Ruben, a childhood friend, recalls that they both "learned to draw from Alex Raymond's (Flash Gordon) comic books."[8] As a mature artist, Berman invented two alter-personae kept free of everything pedestrian and pragmatic. Under the names Pantale Xantos and Marcia Jacobs, Wallace published poetry and epigrams. Beyond the fact that he thought it "a good Jewish name," Marcia Jacobs evinces

Berman's delight with the life of Apollinaire's friend, the poet Max Jacob. In the Paris of 1909, the poet converted from his unpracticed Jewish faith to Catholicism after having two visions of Christ, the first as he was entering his shabby quarters and the second while walking down the aisle of a movie theater.

As a youngster, Wallace claimed the street for his territory. What pulled him toward identity with a transient community of hustlers? Certainly, it was not pleasant to be one of a population of blacks, Jews and other non-Anglos lacking the characteristics so popular with Americans during and after World War II, when "no coloreds" policies were the rule, and the results of a poll of GIs revealed that 22 percent felt the Germans had "some good reasons" for "being down on the Jews" (another 10 percent were "undecided").[9] When one finds it extremely distasteful, difficult or impossible to make a living as a member of the acceptable order, one makes one's living outside of convention and frequently outside of the law.

Wallace ran as an adept, then as a full-fledged master of the con, that orchestration of word and gesture that adds up to maximum control. There is no doubt that what Wallace understood best was the qualities of ephemerality and mutability; what he loved best was possibility. He worked hard and with consummate skill to manipulate reality into a place where he could watch the magnificently simple mechanism of Chance *transform*.

Berman's first useful understanding of where art came from and what it could do came about through his interests in bebop, a music closely tied to the hard core of American underground life. Understanding came with his acknowledgment that whatever beauty managed miraculously to emerge from the enforced alienation of that life would be connected with displacement, its loneliness and the pain of wounds never allowed to heal. And that the use of every means known to dull one's awareness of that pain was an expected part of efforts to "maintain."

Robert Alexander, a poet, who would teach Wallace how to work a printing press, testifies to Wallace's preoccupations at the time of their first meeting around 1946:

Let me put it to you this way. Wally had a great eye for insanity. . . . There is in greatness, sometimes, or (in) the creative act . . . , a certain kind of non-sense, the true meaning of

which (is understood) only by someone who is non-sensibly perceptive. And then it's not an intellectual thing. I think the thing that drew Wally to me was my insanity . . . ; he sensed (in me) something completely untameable, unrehearsed."[10]

For a year or so between the summer of 1944 and 1946, Berman attended art school. Art curricula during the '40s in Southern California were dominated by the applied arts. The Bauhaus, and Rico Lebrun, were the dominant forces. The only works of Berman's that have come to light from the period (1943–1947) are five "vignette-like" pencil drawings of celebrities, composed with the assistance of an animator's light table." Narrative juxtapositions of images, desentimentalized and brutally ironic, they are early confirmation of Berman's preoccupation with content and with the use of duplicative processes to expedite the setting up of a formal language to contain his meanings. Many years later, in a letter, Wallace referred to this work: "a portfolio of drawings (*terrible ones*). . . , 5 or 6 in the series—one of Slim Gaillard, etc. . . ."[12] When a collector approached Wallace about purchasing two of the drawings (Nat "King" Cole and Harry "The Hipster" Gibson), he initially refused. Eventually he agreed, but only after blocking out his signature on both. pieces. The remaining drawings (Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Durante, and Slim Gaillard) were kept hidden in Wallace's studio.

Appropriately, Berman's first public recognition as an artist came, in part, out of his involvement with bebop's small but fanatically devoted audience, an audience constituting a subculture—possibly the first of its kind on American soil voluntarily to embrace a continuum of cross-ethnic ideas and values, to live by its own nondiscriminatory codes of conduct, and to canonize its practicing pioneers. In December of 1945, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie brought bop to the West Coast after New York's 52nd Street clubs had been closed down by military authorities, vice detectives and narcotics agents. In 1947, Wallace did the cover of an album called *Bebop Jazz*. This announcement appeared in a newsletter put out by the Tempo Music Shop:

As a special to its readers, Jazz Tempo is now offering a limited supply of lithographs of Wally Berman, the artist with the fantastic ideas who designed the cover for the 1947 Bebop Jazz Album on Dial label. Wally's latest creation is difficult to describe in writing, it's that weird and wonderful. It's a drawing that only a modern jazz artist of Wally's

caliber could dream up, and only a true jazz enthusiast could understand. In other words, all that can be said is that it's great!

It was another ten years before Wallace was again accorded public notoriety. His first exhibition, at the Ferus Gallery, was closed down two weeks after its opening by the Los Angeles Police Department's vice squad and Wallace arrested for "displaying lewd and pornographic matter."

During the ten years between 1947 and 1957, Wallace transformed himself and his work radically. By the age of 24 or 25, he had started to come to terms with the kind of life that he had been leading. That he had totally identified himself with the hustling scene—pool halls, card sharps, the facades and manipulations—became problematic where it had not seemed to be so before. With a newly awakened desire for an integrated approach to his own life, I think there arose questions of inhumanity—of emotional callousness, and physical and mental brutality. I think that their proximity to Wallace's psyche began to appear threatening to his survival as an artist.

Charlie Parker's career set a vivid and frightening example: the obvious genius of the man's music, his long struggle for recognition, and his winning of it; his breakdown and incarceration at Camarillo State Hospital outside of Los Angeles was followed by progressively more hideous symptoms of self-annihilation, including not only physical deterioration but an atrophying of the creative force in an inexorable movement toward death. And yet Berman understood and respected the sources of bebop and the blues, and used their formal and spiritual values in much of his subsequent work. For Wallace, Afro-American music was a language so in love with its own origins that there seemed to be no difference between the purity of a thousand-year-old impulse and its expression in the instant. Bebop and post-bop jazz refused the concept of history as a linear, nonparallel phenomenon and affirmed that the musical language of Africa could function in a contemporary nonaboriginal society. But by 1950 or 1951, Wallace had come to the realization that one finally had to excavate one's own territory; he was of Hebrew, not African, lineage. Thus, Wallace set out to map the province of selfhood, to break out of the encrustations of conventional style and taste, and to "swing with the secrets." The attendant purpose was, of course, to *survive* it all.

Mind and sensorium opened wide, Wallace engaged in activities which made deep impressions, a "discovery" of the Symbolist and Surrealist poets, his avid readings of *View* and *VVV*, frequent visits to William Copley's gallery, regular attendance at Raymond Rohauer's screenings of classic Surrealist films—in short, a thorough awareness of Los Angeles as a refuge for the Surrealist avant-garde. Then in a letter to filmmaker Larry Jordan written years after actual circumstance, Wallace mentions that he has "Just reread Nijinsky's diary—so beautiful—One of the books that lifted me from the poolroom. . . ."[13] So it is not necessarily the cataclysmic occurrences that instigate the most profound changes. While the street continued to exert a vital influence, Berman's direct involvements modulated into a cool, objectified detachment. One might remark of Wallace at this period, as Robert Lebel observed of Duchamp, that "[i]t is not that . . . [he] was completely immune to inner drama, but his dramatic period seemed terminated once and for all . . ."[14]

In December of 1952, Wallace married and moved into a rustic one-room bungalow on Crater Lane in Beverly Glen, a canyon area north of Sunset Boulevard above UCLA. The house became a gathering place for a most extraordinary group of individuals, most of whom identified Wallace as the "silent" leader.

No later than 1954, he acquired his first still camera, an Argus C-3, frequently encouraging his subjects to move before the camera without inhibition, restricting himself to natural light, and experimenting with hand-scratched acetate sheets, which gave the final prints a veil of .cross-hatching. It was in Charles Brittin's darkroom that he learned to control the final appearance of his prints.

Up until 1955 Wallace worked at the Salem Furniture Company, a firm specializing in the reproduction of classic Shaker furniture designs, staining, distressing, and assembling wooden components. Wallacesalvaged scraps—a random cabinet or hutch door, table legs, chair rungs, hat pegs, stray door knobs and drawer pulls—all very simple, elegant elements characterized by curiously telescoped methods of affecting antiquity. Using factory equipment and, later, working at Crater Lane, Berman began to assemble the pieces into sculptures.

Wallace assumed with superior confidence the moral armor of the artist. He quit the factory gig in 1955 and divided his time between Crater Lane and a storefront studio on Sawtelle Boulevard, shared with Bob Alexander, that became the base for a joint venture Alexander and Berman named Stone Brothers Printing. Readings and performances "happened" at intervals, Stone Brothers having become the crossroads for a peculiar assortment of humanity. The actors Dennis Hopper, Bobbie Driscoll and Dean Stockwell spent a good deal of time there, as did the painters Ed Moses, Craig Kauffman and Billy Al Bengston, who had studios down the block; Alex Trocchi, David Meltzer and a flock of other writers visited frequently; Rachel Rosenthal became a friend, having just arrived from New York (her studio had been above Rauschenberg's and Johns' and she had worked as a member of Merce Cunningham's dance group); then there was Walter Hopps.

At the same time, under the influence of Bob Alexander, Wallace bought his own 5-by-8-inch Kelly handpress which he kept at home on Crater Lane. Some two years before, Alexander had showed Wallace a mock-up of a small anthology publication he intended to issue periodically with the title *Collectanea 13*, its format a 6-by-9-inch folder with an inner pocket to contain individually printed entries. Wallace began to print *Semina* in 1955 from Crater Lane. The predominant format over its nine-issue life (1955–1964) was a folder with an inner pocket. This folio contained prose, poetry, drawings, photographs. Wallace was the editor, publisher, printer and distributor, as well as a consistent contributor.

It is finally at Berman's first exhibition, at the Ferus Gallery, that we are given a body of work exemplary of thoroughly realized changes. The psychologically delicate issues that he had confronted had resolved into a regular set of visual metaphors, 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. Latin phrases appear occasionally in the pieces, the first tentative step toward locating a universal language—a visual equivalent of music. Finally, there is a full-blown recognition of Wallace's intimate, if intuitive, apprehension of his own genealogy.

A fascination with the dialectic of mythologizing and demythologizing objects and actions persists among the "community" of pieces in the Ferus show. *Homage to Hesse*, the earliest of the sculptural works, has a purely formal, nonliterary presence that makes it unique in

Berman's oeuvre. In the rest of the works, the literary content expands significantly. There are 12 or 13 untitled pieces of identical size: Hebrew characters in chance arrangements written on paper carefully treated to evoke antiquity. Wallace had worked on one large sheet of paper, tearing apart each fragment and mounting it on a stretched canvas. Twenty-two pieces had been planned; the series was abandoned at the halfway mark.

Of the most significant works in the exhibition, *The Panel* visually documents the radical transition in Berman's work. Collaged to the outside of a cabinet door hinged onto the central panel is the fragment of a drawing, the last appearance of the earlier illustrative style; on the reverse of that same door is a large number 12. The door opens not onto a contained space, but onto another door of sorts, really a large panel. A small box with a hinged door has collaged on it a fragment of a letter from the artist; behind that door is a mirror, and beside that, a fragment of paper with Hebrew calligraphy. Beneath this is an elliptical hunk of wood, oddly marred and carved deeply with a cross. The whole, housed in a rough-hewn box-frame, is a complex game of identities lost and found, of paradoxes and tautologies, of secret messages.

Berman anticipated the possibility of scandal in connection with the Ferus show, predicting privately that it might stem from public reaction to the assemblage *Cross*. The visit from the vice squad was made in response to a complaint registered with the Los Angeles Police Department by an anonymous caller. And as there had been advance warning of the visitation, a small crowd had assembled at the Ferus on the morning of June 27th.

The officers cruised the gallery, having trouble locating the offending object: they passed *Cross* several times without seeing it at all. By then the tension and anticipation had become unbearable, if comical. The story goes that Ed Kienholz (partner in the Ferus with Walter Hopps) decided to expedite matters by approaching the tableau called *Temple* and uncovering its partially hidden reproduction from *Semina 1* of a drawing by the artist Cameron.

Kienholz inquired whether this drawing was the item that they might be looking for. Well, I guess it must be, they said. So the copy of *Semina* on the floor of *Temple* was confiscated. Berman, as its publisher, was served with papers, arrested, and taken to Lincoln Heights to

spend two nights in the can. The trial, ironically, was presided over by the judge who had tried the obscenity case against Henry Miller. Unfortunately, the issues at stake were not exploited in a way that might have achieved any moral or legal victories for the artist. Cameron, who had done the drawing in question, was not on trial, and, at the time, preferred, for compelling personal reasons, not to use the opportunity to make a political statement regarding her art. So constitutional issues were never seriously engaged and the trial ended, Wallace having been for the most part silent, entrapped by his own sense of impotence. When asked by the judge if he had anything to say before the pronouncement of' verdict and sentence, Wallace approached the courtroom blackboard and quietly wrote, "There is no justice. Only revenge." The magistrate announced "Guilty as charged" and levied a fine of $150. A friend, the actor Dean Stockwell, paid the fine, and Wallace was released. The show at the Ferus did not reopen.

The months between the June bust and the end of the year were governed by anger and the specter of paranoia, then a slowly spreading bile, a bitterness. It occurred to Wallace, I believe, that morality was relative. Although it had been his intention to establish a point of view which could protect him from the perversions of politically and economically based ethics, his self-constructed morality had been a "reasoned" system, evidently too idealistic to be useful when "the curtain dropped heaviest." A new strategy seemed to be called for: the artist must conduct the revolution in a way that precludes the agents of control from co-opting and defusing it by turning it into mass entertainment. It means staying underground, and it means locating sympathizers. If you recognize yourself as one of us, nod quietly and arm yourself. As Burroughs says, "It is a long trip. We are the only riders."

Semina 2, produced at Crater Lane from July to December of 1957, reads like an anthology of jeremiads. Berman's editorial choices reflect his awareness of the need to shift courses to avoid the "past prerecording [his] 'future.'" For the first time, the vision of artist as martyr appears. The entry "Patience" by Paul Eluard is indicative:

You are my patient women my patient my parent
Throat high suspended organ of slow night
Reverence hiding all skies in its grace
Prepare for vengeance a bed from which I shall be born.

There is also a recurrence, if one wishes to call it that, of "junkie" imagery. There had always been, and would always be, friends of Wallace's strung out on the "junk" trip. Wallace never involved himself except as a repelled, if fascinated, spectator. The junkie, however, became one incarnation of the Victim, a leitmotif which appears with increasing frequency in his work, both visual and literary. Again from *Semina 2*, Wallace writing as Pantale Xantos:

A face raped by innummerable
messiahs places into sodden c
otton an anxious needle A face hisses rules to cathedr
als and prepares for the narco
myth.

On the final page, we find the epigram "ART IS LOVE IS GOD," which Wallace had used on the announcement for the Ferus exhibition: some six months later it appeared resonating dark and ironic harmonics.

The second issue of *Semina* was assembled and distributed from San Francisco. On the back cover appears a brief description of Berman's arrest and trial which announces plans for a self-imposed "exile": "I will continue to print 'Semina' from locations other than this city of degenerate angels." During this period of voluntary exile spent in Northern California (December 1957–May 1961), the Bermans lived in the Fillmore district of San Francisco, then in a house on the Corte Madera Creek in Larkspur, Marin County. San Francisco—North Beach in particular—was just entering a year of most frenetic activity. The Bay Area had been, since the early '20s, a forge for political and esthetic avant-gardes. San Francisco tended to display a greater tolerance than Los Angeles for its bohemian population, although by 1958 media hype and rampant social psychosis began to destroy the viability of the community.

But in 1957 and early 1958 a younger sort of American inundated the Bay Area. If many seemed unable to find footholds, they were open to experiencing life without prejudice or reservation. And among them were a few important minds, with strong visions of the future. With few exceptions, the artists and poets who had a personal significance in

Wallace's life seem to share, in equal degree, his own obscurity. Perhaps best known among them would be the poet Robert Duncan, the poet-playwright Michael McClure, the artists Bruce Conner and Jess, the poet David Meltzer, the photographer Patricia Jordan and the filmmaker Larry Jordan. Two others need special mention. Jay De Feo, an important and neglected painter, is possibly the only individual to match the fusion and confusion of art and life that Wallace accomplished. Wallace's series of nine photographs of De Feo captured her delicate balance of openhearted vulnerability and enigmatic strength.

Then, one would have to talk about the poet John Wieners. There truly is a region where poetry and conversation re-merge into an undifferentiated swarm of words, and some men do inhabit it. *"The real one of many, the illusory far and near intersect to push behavior's stream, dependent on questing, producing revelatory postures of men, animals and stars."*[15] So said John, and so he was, living in an upstairs room in Wallace's house on Scott Street. Wallace gently cared for John, precisely, as John saw, because of their mutual need, indeed their mutual gift, for *"realizing quality out of strangeness."*[16]

Berman spent a lot of his time in San Francisco out on the streets. Three issues of *Semina* were published in San Francisco, the last being number five (1959–1960). *Semina 3* (1958) was entirely Michael McClure's "Peyote Poem." *Semina 4* (1959) includes a fair sampling of poets making the North Beach scene, work by some members of the Los Angeles contingent and samples of Yeats, William S. Burroughs, Blake and Allen Ginsberg. The Berman's San Francisco household would become a crashpad, a "shooting gallery," a rendezvous for acquaintances and total strangers whose meanderings in and out made serious work at home impossible. The original demography of North Beach—a solid, ethnic, working-class neighborhood—had been superseded by a transient population of artists and pseudo-hipsters and, from Wallace's point of view, it had turned into an "artists' colony": "They terrify me, like tract houses. . . . Everyone doing the same thing."[17] Berman, however, had become a local celebrity on the Beach; a 1958 *Look* magazine article featured Wallace as the North Beach "poet-maker."

Late summer 1960 through spring 1961 was spent in Larkspur, in Mill Valley, in hopeful retreat from the attentions and pressures of the city. Again, a small coterie began to develop around Wallace. There was initially some encouragement on that score, with Wallace

opening an art gallery of sorts in an abandoned, roofless houseboat, where exhibitions and performances were held. *Semina VI* (sic), "The Clown," a long poem by David Meltzer, came out in 1960 as planned. Wallace says in a letter at this time "im in a corner don't want to move dont want to hang up landlady shes as beat as we are—been pasting up Seminas like demented but this is only day to day loot."18 In spite of extreme economic pressures, the Larkspur contingent held ground in high spirits for many months before a pall of *déjà vu* descended. North Beach had come to the attention of the city political machine; resultant police crackdowns fostered overt hostility. Rents in the suddenly fashionable section inflated to the point where its most recent habitués could no longer afford to live there. An epidemic of narcotics abuse (particularly involving methedrine) turned a fomerly creative community into an open-air freak show. Gray Line tour buses lined the curbs to get a closer look.

The gradual dispersion eventually brought refugees to Berman's door, and the media followed. In an article which appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1961, Wallace touched on another source of his ballooning discomfort: " 'Look Tosh,' he said, pointing east along the shore, 'that's San Quentin. That's where the State burned [Caryl] Chessman.'" The Victim reappeared as the operative image in *Semina 7* (1961), Wallace's personal vehicle ("Aleph/a gesture involving photographs drawings & text by Wallace Berman"). The cover image, in reference to the recent Chessman execution, makes use of an old poster for the premiere of Susan Hayward in the 1958 movie *I Want To Live*. The face of the image has literally been "rubbed out," rendered anonymous and given over to the viewer as his victimized counterpart. The gesture anticipated a series of later pieces (1963–64) in which Wallace "rubbed out" the faces of rows of portraits of prominent political figures. The contents of *Semina 7* seem elegiac in tone, echoing a restrained and tender sense of melancholy.

BOXED CITY

My beautiful wife
Rearranges deaf photographs talks
Rococo & dances off four walls

Son Tosh pencils the faithful
Image & ignores the subtle drama

Stoned in black corduroy I continue
To separate seeds
From the bulk.

FAIRYTALE FOR TOSH

The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead

The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead
The wolf is dead

The wolf is dead

In an eerie moment of clairvoyance, Wallace noted the following below a photographic *nature morte* with portraits of Cocteau and Nijinsky as double talismans:

Spurred by what reason
Do I leave this ark
For the 'city of degenerate
Angels' 500 miles south other than to die

In May of 1961, the Bermans moved back to Los Angeles, to Crater Lane. *Semina 8* was issued from there in 1963. *Semina 9* (1964) contained a single item, Michael McClure's "Dallas Poem." Sensing, I think, that between the public executions of Caryl Chessman and John Kennedy something larger had been killed in the minds of the American people, Wallace let a decade rest and with it the publication of *Semina*. When the Crater Lane

house was destroyed in a landslide, in December 1964, much of the early work—drawings, photographs and negatives, sculptures—was lost. Topanga Canyon was the Bermans' new home and last move. In the years to follow, the need or desire for constant company abated and Wallace spent longer periods of time working alone. He acquired an 8mm Bolex camera and began shooting film again: "the camera for the first time feels 'rite'—like a brush or . . . With 16 I was never comfortable—now find great excitement . . ."[19]

The Verifax collages made between 1964 and 1976 represent the most cohesive body of works within Berman's surviving oeuvre, the artist's vital apprehension of language as a system for containing and manipulating meaning. Originally, a small Sony television pictured in a magazine advertisement provided Wallace with his central icon. Onto its screen he collaged a series of single or combined images, either "found" photographs or images that he shot, developed and printed himself. After a period of experimentation, he abandoned the television unit as too small, awkward, and lacking the essential element of music. In its place appeared a hand holding a small transistor radio, again taken from a print media source. The speaker panel became "screen" onto which were projected the vocabulary of pictographs which Wallace began to develop. The Verifax machine, whose grainy sepia tonalities can be altered by spiking the developing chemicals and manipulating exposure times, fused the collaged images into one undifferentiated image-object comparable to the Surrealist concept of the word-as-object. In juxtaposition, the combines become *poèmes concrètes*.

Thus, in the Verifaxes, the perceptual act is equated with reading and its mental corollary, interpretation. The images, in fact, are composed in the manner of words placed on a page, Berman's conception of "ground" akin to Mallarmé's concept of the area of the page as "a void of meaning upon which, into which, in which the poem appears." The radios, fit snugly into the palms of the hands, sit schematically on the "page"; they evoke the conjuror's gesticulation or the presentation of the Tarot cards dealt for those awaiting a glimpse of their future. Further, these works are best considered as one extended "book," and not only "book" in the literary sense, but also in the jazz musician's vernacular: that carefully guarded record of original works that documents a composer-performer's "sound," his mark of singular identity.

Indeed, music continued to exert a primary influence on Wallace from the early jazz drawings to the later Verifax pieces, some of which carry actual song titles: *"You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'," "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag."* What gradually evolves in the Verifax series is a complex substratum of associations between blues and bebop as modes of expression, and the modes of the hand-radio pieces. The 12-bar blues, for example, is a virtually fixed form given life by the emotional investment in its content by the blues artist. Bebop, a content-conservative music, drew primarily on a reserve of standard popular tunes and swing riffs, retaining their intervallic character but changing register, key, tone and chord sequences, and hatching new rhythmic structures and timbres, thereby reinventing meaning entirely. Similarly, Wallace's inventions on repetitive formal structures and vernacular content allowed for the kind of wild improvisations that clarify the visual experience in much the same way that Charlie Parker had clarified the experiencing of sound.

If the pioneers of bebop had it in mind to reenergize Afro-American musical language, to reenergize the visual language of his particular experience of the world was a central objective of Berman's. Besides his affection for jazz and the blues, his natural affinity for the Symbolist and Surrealist poets is reflected in his decision to dismantle and restructure the conventions of illusionistic representation. In their place he developed a visual analogue to Reverdy's formula by which the poet proposed to "eliminate conventional syntax and punctuation, to have no linking words, no adjectives, and no adverbs, so that only the force of nouns clashing together would be left."[20] Jonathan Swift seems to be the father of them all, for in Book Three of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift suggests that language be dragged one step beyond even that, simply by eliminating nouns entirely. Communications could then proceed by holding up *actual objects*. Wallace, it seems, has given us a kind of lexicon for the Swiftian cosmos.

William Burroughs, the most recent heir to these linguistic experiments (via Gertrude Stein, Tristan Tzara, James Joyce), has pushed them even further than his predecessors. Berman's work has a profound resemblance to that of Burroughs, particularly its conceptual and formal frameworks and the author's interests in the state of "total freedom." In both "Sound" and "Silent" series, Berman identified through independent means with a philosophy that Burroughs has termed "factualism"—an impersonal,

nonjudgmental vision which eliminates the concept of "taste" as instrumental in the creative process.

All arguments, all nonsensical condemnations as to what people "should do" are irrelevant. Ultimately there is only fact on all levels, and the more one argues, verbalizes, moralizes, the less he will see and feel of fact. Needless to say I will not write any formal statement on the subject. Talk is incompatible with factualism.

The transactional nature of gambling as an activity—the specific functions, within it, of shuffling and dealing—reappear in the Verifax works as a methodology that is a counterpart to Burroughs' "cut-up" methods. Both serve the purpose of desentimentalizing images. Through the shuffling of "association blocks," unidentified, therefore uncontrolled, content reveals itself, and submerged meanings surface.

The image of the radio speaker/screen alludes to a wilderness of tangent symbols: a doorway; a window; certainly a mirror, that object representing the interface between the world as we experience it and the strange territory of "reversed reason," of deceptions and madness. In row upon row of the hand/radio aggregates, Wallace juxtaposes fragments from a variety of sources, combining and recombining them in no particular sequential order, without a dominant or centralizing idea. There is no prescribed technique for "reading" or "scanning" the pieces. We can only become an accomplice in the constant flashing of pictographs on our retinal "screen"—images in focus and those within peripheral view crystallizing in constantly shifting vistas shrouded in an "atmosphere of conflicting particles" reminiscent of the proto-Imagist poetry of Baudelaire and Poe. This also recalls Burroughs' methods of assembling a vast range of disconnected, unintegrated images into "assorted blocks," accompanied by injunctions to "shift coordinate points."[21]

The effect is cinematic: we are asked to conceptualize time, to submit to sensations of expansion and compression, of nonlinearity, of swirling, shifting points of view, out of which emerge the awareness of a "conspiracy" of objects and events, an active surreality. The viewer is inclined to surrender distinctions between fantasy and reality. Meanings emerge as the viewer becomes involved in a series of rapid transformations in which space

and time become shadows thrown across an imaginary screen, projections of a language perceived in the movements of its own creation.

This total body of works Wallace designated with the title *Radio/Aether*. Aether, that all-pervading, infinitely elastic, massless medium that was formerly postulated as the medium of propagation for electromagnetic waves, is also known, in tradition, as the heavenly space beyond earth's atmosphere, the spiritual realm. The activation of the aether metaphor in conjunction with the radio icon sets up additional implications. Like Charles Olson's poems, constructed, or "scored" as a "field" of work-objects acting as conduits in the transferring and transforming of energy, Berman's multiple-image Verifaxes are fields of energy; each image, like every substance in nature, is endowed with a characteristic set of resonant frequencies at which it vibrates or oscillates.

What becomes apparent here is that the radio image, like the original image of the television, is less important for its objecthood than for its implied potential for *transformation*. This brings us full circle to what is perhaps the central issue of Berman's work, namely the issue of *control*. In "the invisible generation," an essay appended to *The Ticket That Exploded*, Burroughs reminds us that "what we see is determined to a large extent by what we hear." It is a terrifying "given" that media—particularly the mesmerizing qualities of electronic media—can corrupt language and control minds. We have only to be reminded of the *Volksempfanger*, the radio built at low cost in large quantities, and put on the market in Germany, trademarked "VE301," in memory of Hitler's seizure of power on January 30, 1933. Regarded as a "political instrument," it had been engineered so that "only the nearest local station could be received."[22] With full comprehension of their implications, Berman used these symbols of potential control and corruption in ways that would eliminate conditioned responses and open up channels for "Total Communication."

Around 1972 Wallace again began to make three-dimensional objects—wooden boxes with windowlike faces, filled by water-smoothed stones and emblazoned with Hebrew characters. There were boulders—Wallace titled one *Seed*—simply endowed with Hebrew letters arranged in "paragraphs," according to choice (and Chance). There were smaller rocks wrapped in chain and displayed like treasured specimens on pedestals; one has a title

plate which reads "OF THE RADIO/AETHER." Works were done *in situ*: a white wall behind Wallace's Topanga home painted with Talmudic care, a few calligraphic characters on the face of the chimney of Topanga's Mermaid Tavern. Or a cryptic message affixed to a boulder—part of a jetty in Ventura County. Wallace chose that location with great care: the ocean-end of a road of rocks. This particular boulder saw light at low tide: at high tide, it spoke its strange cabala to a dark and watery world. With perfect and inevitable freedom, over a period of years, the message has worn off and rejoined the aether.

Wallace Berman has been credited with being the originator of the Assemblage movement in California,[23] although that, in the long run, may obscure his more central role as well as cheating future speculators out of some very fertile territory. It seems more useful to consider, more broadly, that Berman's closest affinities are with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, with Marcel Duchamp, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, and with the likes of Jim Morrison, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, Brian Eno, and David Bowie—artists who have used rock-and-roll as a readymade language.

At any rate, the distinguishing property of each of these individuals—Berman among them—is a kind of transparency. Possibly one could think of each as being possessed of "a will favorable to hazard," a phrase conjured by Max Ernst in *Beyond Painting* and to which he appended Hume's definition of hazard: "The equivalence of ignorance in which we find ourselves in relation to the real cause of events." It is precisely this quality of transparency (certainly a kind of "ignorance" Wallace comprehended when he told a friend that he identified himself with The Fool's card in the Tarot deck) which allows each artist to *incarnate* or *occupy*, rather than simply to exemplify, his particular set of coordinate points in human history.

The artist's strategy in each case is based on the proposition that for all intents and purposes, the human being is a transparent network of transformers and transmitters occupied with collecting and systematizing content. Implicit in this system is the moment of fulfillment, illumination or enlightenment, which is a metaphor for a knowledge at once abstract and concrete, universal and personal, secreted and apocalyptic. It is important because of, rather than in spite of, its paradoxical nature.

Rimbaud and Burroughs experienced "illumination" after deliberate, relentless attempts at brutalizing their native sensibilities, an obsessively morbid process in which victimizer and victim share absolute identity. Samuel Beckett's work is preoccupied with the state of entrapment and the inability of the entrapped to make the decision to take action. Transformation is eternally delayed and "illumination" takes on a dumbly literal meaning.[24]

Of course, it is Duchamp, with his transparent networks of containers, delays, illuminants, who most gracefully and systematically employed these archetypal metaphors. Indeed, Berman and Duchamp are much alike. Both loved to play jokes on the viewer/voyeur by drawing his attention to something "there" to indicate the "not there," just as often drawing attention to the "not there," while begging the question of whether the "not there" was "there" in fact! Berman apparently began to take pleasure in the fact that certain of his earlier works (e.g. *The Panel* and *Temple*) existed for future viewers only as photographs. Friend and artist Russel Tamblyn has remarked that Wallace, at certain points, seemed almost to be making pieces just in order to photograph them. This gives one a sense of Wallace's methodical madness with regard to history.

If someone will explain Chinese
perspective to me—I will elaborate
on the Choctaw & Cherokee blood
in Jack Dempsey.
For John Birch & Cherokee blood
P. Xantos
Embarcadero, 1959[25]

Further, Berman and Duchamp acted both as patient and doctor, and during a life of operations performed on their own unanesthesized selves, succeeded in practicing what they preached. Thus, in the process of making art about illumination and transformation, they were themselves illuminated and transformed. If there is the paradoxical concurrence of a wonderful, honest narcissism and a remote, dispassionate selflessness about their works, it simply attests to their respective abilities to "work both sides of the fence." Finally, though, Berman operated on the understanding that his own particular power

could not be touched directly, although its essential energy, somewhat translated, could be perceived at some remove. Ultimately Wallace (Pantale Xantos and Marcia Jacobs included) lived in another part of the same nebulae inhabited by Duchamp (and Rrose Sélevy): "in that mist behind the glass."[26]

History is fiction, as Burroughs remarks. It is made up of discrete vessels of content, their manipulation being a game whose object is to reinvent history on one's own terms. It is a high-risk game, there being more than a very good chance of losing self, of being occupied rather than occupying one's human container. However, if one is a master, one could gain sufficient power and enough control to "cut the enemy off [one's] line," the enemy "who exists only where no life is."[27] The victor thusly recaptures mystery and reinstates life.

—*Merril Greene*

Unhappily, this article comes after the death of Wallace Berman on February 18, 1976—early on the morning of his fiftieth birthday—from injuries sustained in an auto accident near his Topanga Canyon home.

A portion of the research for this article was supported by a Youthgrant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

NOTES

1. Interview with Shirley Berman. November 17, 1977, Topanga. Calif.

2. Marcel Duchamp, quoted by Robert Lebel in *L'Art magique*, ed. André Breton and Gérard Legrand, Paris, p. 98.

3. David Meltzer, Ragas, San Francisco, 1959.

4. Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," reprinted in Donald M. Allen, ed., *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 1974, p. xiv:

_Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's at art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it . . . [O]ne of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity. . . . It was founded by me . . . on a day in which I was in love with someone . . . I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to, I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. . . . The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty. I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it.

5. Ibid., p. xiii:

How can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. . . . Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them.

6. Letter, undated, to Zack Walsh.

7. Letter, dated March 31, 1961, to Zack Walsh.

8. Interview with Richard Ruben, April 14, 1977, New York.

9. Joseph C. Goulden, *The Best Years 1945–50*, New York, 1976, pp. 47–48.

10. Interview with Robert Alexander, January 26, 1977, Venice, Calif.

11. Interview with Dion Vigne, June 23, 1977, San Francisco, Calif.

12. Letter, undated, to Zack Walsh.

13. Letter dated January 28, 1965, to Larry and Patricia Jordon Reference to *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, ed. Romola Nijinsky, New York, 1936.

14. Robert Lebel, "Marcel Duchamp and Andre Breton," in *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Anne D'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, New York, 1973, p. 137.

15. John Wieners, *Selected Poems*, New York, 1972, p. 5.

16. Larry Schneider, “Simple Life: No False Values in House Boat,” *San Francisco Examiner*, day unknown, 1961.

17. Letter, September 15, 1960, to Zack Walsh.

18. Letter, January 28, 1965, to Larry and Patricia Jordan.

19. Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination*, The Hague, 1966, p. 59: cited by John Vernon in *The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture*, Urbana, HI., 1973, p. 101.

20. Burroughs in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, cited by John Tytell in *Naked Angels: The Lives Literature of the Beat Generation*, New York, 1977, p. 112.

21. William S Burroughs, *Nova Express*, New York, 1964, pp. 32–35.

22. The catalogue of Edward Kienholz’s recent “Volksempfanger” series at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, 1977, quotes the Nazi radio law of September 7, 1939:

1. It is prohibited to listen intentionally to foreign stations. Violators wit be jailed or, if the case requires, imprisoned with hard a labour.

2. Anybody who deliberately spreads or publicizes news transmit-ted by foreign stations and which are of a nature to jeopardize the power of resistance of the German people, will be sentenced to hard prison, or, if the case requires, to death.

23. John Coplans, “Circles of Style on the West Coast,” *Art In America*, June

24. In “Play” (1963), for instance, Beckett gives the following stage directions:

Front centre, touching one another, three identical grey urns. . . . From each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn’s mouth. . . They face undeviatingly front throughout the play. Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns. But no

masks. Their speech is provoked by a spotlight projected on faces alone. . . . The source of light is single and must not be situated outside ideal space (stage) occupied by its victims.

Samuel Beckett, "Play," in his *Cascando and Other Short Dramatic Pieces*, New York, 1967. pp. 45. 62.

25. Item from *Semina 7*.

26. Letter dated October 4, 1954, from Duchamp to André Breton, in *Marchand du Sel*. p. 164, cited by Anne d'Harnoncourt in her introduction to Marcel Duchamp, (Note 14), pp. 43–44. D'Harnoncourt's translation.

27. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (Note 21), p. 14.

Merril Greene

WALLACE BERMAN

Portrait of the Artist as an Underground Man

A young man arrived at the door to Wallace Berman's Topanga Canyon home looking for the center of the Earth. Someone had told him, he claimed, that Wallace Berman's house was the center of the Earth and he'd come from England to find it.[1]

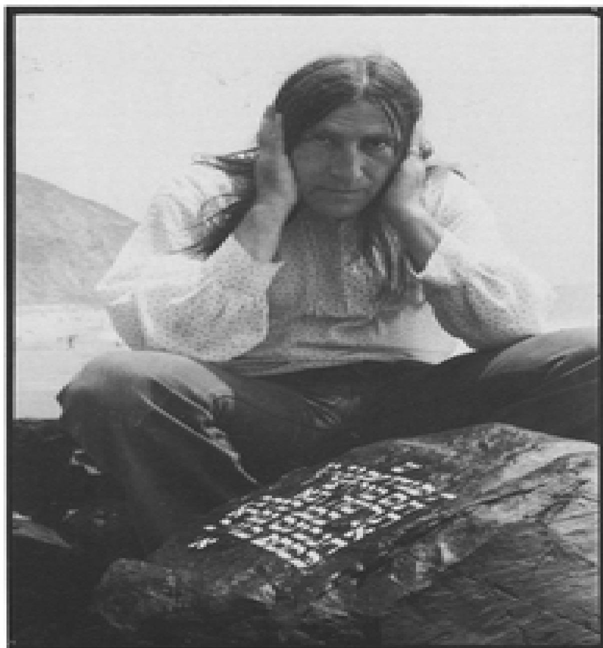
It was from Walter Hopps that I first heard about Wallace Berman, and it was in the context of Los Angeles in the 1950s and not San Francisco, the mecca where most everyone thought that everything, but daddy everything, happened. What was happening in Los Angeles around 1955 was important, although there were very few so willing as Walter Hopps to pass over what conventionally was assumed to have a future, and to assign seemingly disproportionate historical significance to the intimate and funky revolutions taking place all over L.A.

When I met Berman, I encountered a small man with long hair who looked marvelously like a cross between a Hebrew patriarch and an Indian chief; during that meeting, I enjoyed what I regarded as an encounter with mystery. Only now is it apparent that I was but the most recent addition to a history of persons, many of whom were functioning outside the established social order and all of whom considered Wallace a presence out of the ordinary. That some thought of him as a guru was, Wallace presumed, their problem: those who could view matters from Berman's perspective found that kind of presumptuous spirituality almost entirely lacking. Marcel Duchamp had been directed toward a similar locus: "If I have ever practiced alchemy, it was in the only way it can be done now, that is to say, without knowing it."[2]

The poet David Meltzer, in a letter to Wallace published in *Ragas* (1959), touched on the sense of openness to change which characterized Wallace's activities as a poet, artist, filmmaker, editor, photographer and "mandarin," reflecting a vocabulary of images recurrent in Berman's work:

> No hope in making, assembling, binding together ornate bibles of history. The clues are found everywhere: outside the printed word; inside the sleeping poet; on the streets; beneath the sea; in levels, stratum, the years of a desert; and aurora around all the dead we bury within ourselves
>
> *
>
> Reconsider the wind that moves flags, touches tents: an invisible snake running thru the grass.
> Reconsider poems taken up by the wind, carried into the sky as clouds. Shadows of men (Time) bend backwards, disappearing.
> To grow, the plant considers feet, eyes, the brush.
> A poem challenges nothing. Bends with the wind.
> A leaf, the stalk—flexible.[3]

Wallace frequently used as a kind of personal logo the calligraphic emblem *Aleph*, the symbol in cabalistic lore for the primordial chaos. By linking it to his own acute sense of mortality, Berman saw *Aleph* as meaning "the all-encompassing man," and this is how he thought of himself. His acceptance of metaphor as an absolutely real, often desirable mode of thought and action complemented his insistent advocacy of an art



Wallace Berman, 1973, Sycamore State Park Beach, Ventura County, California; photograph by Russel Tamblyn.

of essential use, by which he meant not only the employment of all means and materials available regardless of origin and previous function, but also a deployment of his own energies toward the retaking of mystery. This Wallace did knowingly, in moments of his choosing and, in so doing, acted as magician.

Wallace understood very clearly that there were not many chances left to make use of the morality of human scale as a practical reality, not as a parody of some bygone age. He addressed himself as an artist to the exigencies of human lives, rather than appealing to the aggregate of meanings surrounding the title "artist" to remove himself into spheres of pure idea, away from encounters with the tangible and violent extremes of physical and emotional contact.

In a sense, Wallace's obscurity beyond a small circle of admirers was due partly to his own decision to show his work on a strictly personal basis. Although a major portion of Berman's work has been lost or destroyed, there remains to be traced a vast network of correspondence among a global circle of friends and acquaintances. These communications, frequently more visual than verbal in nature, exemplify precisely the way in which Wallace viewed his responsibilities as an individual and an artist in communitas; they bear a lovely and, I think, useful relationship to the poet Frank O'Hara's "Manifesto" on Personism.[4] O'Hara and Berman shared another approach to their work. Wallace did not believe that art was about solving problems, his own or anyone else's. Neither one engaged in art-oriented missionary work with intent to uplift or improve the viewer.[5]

Berman was adamantly silent on why he made art, how he made it, or what it all meant. To my knowledge, he never gave a formal interview. Certainly in our "discussions," the tape recorder remained unused. Although recalling my initial discomfort at his prolonged silences, I realize now that my phrasing of questions had nothing to do with the infrequency of his answers, their vagueness and economy of language. Had I been Walter Cronkite, nothing would have changed. Somehow, this was evidence to me of Wallace's unbelievable lack of prejudice.

I remember asking him one of many boring if dutiful questions: "Where were you born?" For several rounds he acted as if he hadn't heard. Then, graciously, he revealed that he didn't see what that had to do with anything, let alone art. Only eventually did he come forth with "Tompkinsville." "Tompkinsville, where?" He smiled and refused to say. It took another year to learn that Wallace's father had owned a candy factory on Staten Island. It now rests at Wallace Berman, born February 18, 1926, on Staten Island.

Berman was always amused, and occasionally annoyed, at "critic-morticians'" efforts at autopsying the work and at attempts to pigeonhole his life-style. In one of his letters to poet Zack Walsh, he says: "Enclosed is mag just released with photo of (wife) Shirl & i & (poet) Kirby Doyle . . . .—Can yr lawyer sue? The article says we are in a Village coffee shop ive never been to N.Y. Also we are insulted... being in a mag that says on the cover 'The Mafia: America's First Line of Defense' and o so many other personal insults . . . ."[6] In another letter: This photo . . . . was taken four years ago in Los Angeles. . . . Here is the photo in a Washington, D.C. newspaper as a Beatnik. . . . I have never signed any type of release or given permission for the published shots—Can your lawyer do anything??"[7] Wallace proceeded with his life on the primary assumption that all experiences were justifiable grounds for art; what was finally important was adventure and not achievement.

It is important to know that Wallace thought of himself as a gambler and a broker. His fascination with games of every sort—with facades and meanings hidden from view, with the self-generation of myth—predates the self-conscious beginnings of his career as an artist. He grew up in the various Jewish ghettos of Los Angeles amidst the fragmentation and discontent epidemic in that city during and after World War II, the son of a "free-thinking" father who died when Wallace was nine or ten, leaving him a volume of Oscar Wilde and a copy of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T.E. Lawrence.

The poverty and prolonged illness enveloping Wallace as a child encouraged in him a rich imaginary life. The painter Richards Ruben, a childhood friend, recalls that they both "learned to draw from Alex Raymond's (Flash Gordon) comic books."[8] As a mature artist, Berman invented two alter-personae kept free of everything pedestrian and pragmatic. Under the names Pantale Xantos and Marcia Jacobs, Wallace published poetry and epigrams. Beyond the fact that he thought it "a good Jewish name," Marcia Jacobs evinces Berman's delight with the life of Apollinaire's friend, the poet Max Jacob. In the Paris of 1909, the poet converted from his unpracticed Jewish faith to Catholicism after having two visions of Christ, the first as he was entering his shabby quarters and the second while walking down the aisle of a movie theater.

As a youngster, Wallace claimed the street for his territory. What pulled him toward identity with a transient community of hustlers? Certainly, it was not pleasant to be one of a population of blacks, Jews and other non-Anglos lacking the characteristics so popular with Americans during and after World War II, when "no coloreds" policies were the rule, and the results of a poll of GIs revealed that 22 percent felt the Germans had "some good reasons" for "being down on the Jews" (another 10 percent were "undecided").[9] When one finds it extremely distasteful, difficult or impossible to make a living as a member of the acceptable order, one makes one's living outside of convention and frequently outside of the law.

Wallace ran as an adept, then as a full-fledged master of the con, that orchestration of word and gesture that adds up to maximum control. There is no doubt that what Wallace understood best was the qualities of ephemerality and mutability; what he loved best was possibility. He worked hard and with consummate skill to manipulate reality into a place where he could watch the magnificently simple mechanism of Chance transform.

Berman's first useful understanding of where art came from and what it could do came about through his interests in bebop, a music closely tied to the hard core of American underground life. Understanding came with his acknowledgment that whatever beauty managed miraculously to emerge from the

Wallace Berman, Untitled (Harry "The Hipster") c.1944-45, pencil on paper, 13 x 11⅞".

Wallace Berman, *The Panel* (open), 1956-58, assemblage: stained and distressed wood, artist's photograph of Shirley Berman, fragment of letter, mirror (behind door box (work destroyed)

enforced alienation of that life would be connected with displacement, its loneliness and the pain of wounds never allowed to heal. And that the use of every means known to dull one's awareness of that pain was an expected part of efforts to "maintain."

Robert Alexander, a poet, who would teach Wallace how to work a printing press, testifies to Wallace's preoccupations at the time of their first meeting around 1946:

> Let me put it to you this way. Wally had a great eye for insanity. . . . There is in greatness, sometimes, or (in) the creative act . . . . , a certain kind of non-sense, the true meaning of which (is understood) only by someone who is non-sensibly perceptive. And then it's not an intellectual thing. I think the thing that drew Wally to me was my insanity . . . ; he sensed (in me) something completely untameable, unrehearsed.'"[10]

For a year or so between the summer of 1944 and 1946, Berman attended art school. Art curricula during the '40s in Southern California were dominated by the applied arts. The Bauhaus, and Rico Lebrun, were the dominant forces. The only works of Berman's that have come to light from the period (1943–1947) are five "vignette-like" pencil drawings of celebrities, composed with the assistance of an animator's light table.[11] Narrative juxtapositions of images, desentimentalized and brutally ironic, they are early confirmation of Berman's preoccupation with content and with the use of duplicative processes to expedite the setting up of a formal language to contain his meanings. Many years later, in a letter, Wallace referred to this work: "a portfolio of drawings (terrible ones) . . . , 5 or 6 in the series—one of Slim Gaillard, etc. . . ."[12] When a collector approached Wallace about purchasing two of the drawings (Nat "King" Cole and Harry "The Hipster" Gibson), he initially refused. Eventually he agreed, but only after blocking out his signature on both pieces. The remaining drawings (Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Durante, and Slim Gaillard) were kept hidden in Wallace's studio.

Appropriately, Berman's first public recognition as an artist came, in part, out of his involvement with bebop's small but fanatically devoted audience, an audience constituting a subculture—possibly the first of its kind on American soil voluntarily to embrace a continuum of cross-ethnic ideas and values, to live by its own nondiscriminatory codes of conduct, and to canonize its practicing pioneers. In December of 1945, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie brought bop to the West Coast after New York's 52nd Street clubs had been closed down by military authorities, vice detectives and narcotics agents. In 1947, Wallace did the cover of an album called *Bebop Jazz*. This announcement appeared in a newsletter put out by the Tempo Music Shop:

> As a special to its readers, Jazz Tempo is now offering a limited supply of lithographs of Wally Berman, the artist with the fantastic ideas who designed the cover for the 1947 Bebop Jazz Album on Dial label. Wally's latest creation is difficult to describe in writing, it's that weird and wonderful. It's a drawing that only a modern jazz artist of Wally's caliber could dream up, and only a true jazz enthusiast could understand. In other words, all that can be said is that it's great!

Wallace Berman, Cross, 1957, mixed media

Wallace Berman, Temple, 1957, mixed media, 84" high (width and depth unknown; work destroyed).

It was another ten years before Wallace was again accorded public notoriety. His first exhibition, at the Ferus Gallery, was closed down two weeks after its opening by the Los Angeles Police Department's vice squad and Wallace arrested for "displaying lewd and pornographic matter."

During the ten years between 1947 and 1957, Wallace transformed himself and his work radically. By the age of 24 or 25, he had started to come to terms with the kind of life that he had been leading. That he had totally identified himself with the hustling scene—pool halls, card sharps, the facades and manipulations—became problematic where it had not seemed to be so before. With a newly awakened desire for an integrated approach to his own life, I think there arose questions of inhumanity—of emotional callousness, and physical and mental brutality. I think that their proximity to Wallace's psyche began to appear threatening to his survival as an artist.

Charlie Parker's career set a vivid and frightening example: the obvious genius of the man's music, his long struggle for recognition, and his winning of it; his breakdown and incarceration at Camarillo State Hospital outside of Los Angeles was followed by progressively more hideous symptoms of self-annihilation, including not only physical deterioration but an atrophying of the creative force in an inexorable movement toward death. And yet Berman understood and respected the sources of bebop and the blues, and used their formal and spiritual values in much of his subsequent work. For Wallace, Afro-American music was a language so in love with its own origins that there seemed to be no difference between the purity of a thousand-year-old impulse and its expression in the instant. Bebop and post-bop jazz refused the concept of history as a linear, nonparallel phenomenon and affirmed that the musical language of Africa could function in a contemporary nonaboriginal society. But by 1950 or 1951, Wallace had come to the realization that one finally had to excavate one's own territory; he was of Hebrew, not African, lineage. Thus, Wallace set out to map the province of selfhood, to break out of the encrustations of conventional style and taste, and to "swing with the secrets." The attendant purpose was, of course, to survive it all.

Mind and sensorium opened wide, Wallace engaged in activities which made deep impressions, a "discovery" of the Symbolist and Surrealist poets, his avid readings of View and VVV, frequent visits to William Copley's gallery, regular attendance at Raymond Rohauer's screenings of classic Surrealist films—in short, a thorough awareness of Los Angeles as a refuge for the Surrealist avant-garde. Then in a letter to filmmaker Larry Jordan written years after actual circumstance, Wallace mentions that he has "Just reread Nijinsky's diary—so beautiful—One of the books that lifted me from the poolroom. . . ."[13] So it is not necessarily the cataclysmic occurrences that instigate the most profound changes. While the street

ntinued to exert a vital influence, Berman's direct involvements modulated into a cool, objectified detachment. One might remark of Wallace at this period, as Robert Lebel observed of Duchamp, that "[i]t is not that . . . [he] was completely immune to inner drama, but his dramatic period seemed terminated once and for all . . ."[14]

In December of 1952, Wallace married and moved into a rustic one-room bungalow on Crater Lane in Beverly Glen, a canyon area north of Sunset Boulevard above UCLA. The house became a gathering place for a most extraordinary group of individuals, most of whom identified Wallace as the "silent" leader.

No later than 1954, he acquired his first still camera, an Argus C-3, frequently encouraging his subjects to move before the camera without inhibition, restricting himself to natural light, and experimenting with hand-scratched acetate sheets, which gave the final prints a veil of cross-hatching. It was in Charles Brittin's darkroom that he learned to control the final appearance of his prints.

Up until 1955 Wallace worked at the Salem Furniture Company, a firm specializing in the reproduction of classic Shaker furniture designs, staining, distressing, and assembling wooden components. Wallace salvaged scraps—a random cabinet or hutch door, table legs, chair rungs, hat pegs, stray door knobs and drawer pulls—all very simple, elegant elements characterized by curiously telescoped methods of affecting antiquity. Using factory equipment and, later, working at Crater Lane, Berman began to assemble the pieces into sculptures.

Wallace assumed with superior confidence the moral armor of the artist. He quit the factory gig in 1955 and divided his time between Crater Lane and a storefront studio on Sawtelle Boulevard, shared with Bob Alexander, that became the base for a joint venture Alexander and Berman named Stone Brothers Printing. Readings and performances "happened" at intervals, Stone Brothers having become the crossroads for a peculiar assortment of humanity. The actors Dennis Hopper, Bobbie Driscoll and Dean Stockwell spent a good deal of time there, as did the painters Ed Moses, Craig Kauffman and Billy Al Bengston, who had studios down the block; Alex Trocchi, David Meltzer and a flock of other writers visited frequently; Rachel Rosenthal became a friend, having just arrived from New York (her studio had been above Rauschenberg's and Johns' and she had worked as a member of Merce Cunningham's dance group); then there was Walter Hopps.

Wallace Berman, Jay De Feo, 1958; photograph with screened cross-hatching, 5 x 4".

At the same time, under the influence of Bob Alexander, Wallace bought his own 5-by-8-inch Kelly handpress which he kept at home on Crater Lane. Some two years before, Alexander had showed Wallace a mock-up of a small anthology publication he intended to issue periodically with the title Collectanea 13, its format a 6-by-9-inch folder with an inner pocket to contain individually printed entries. Wallace began to print Semina in 1955 from Crater Lane. The predominant format over its nine-issue life (1955-1964) was a folder with an inner pocket. This folio contained prose, poetry, drawings, photographs. Wallace was the editor, publisher, printer and distributor, as well as a consistent contributor.

It is finally at Berman's first exhibition, at the Ferus Gallery, that we are given a body of work exemplary of thoroughly realized changes. The psychologically delicate issues that he had confronted had resolved into a regular set of visual metaphors, 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. Latin phrases appear occasionally in the pieces, the first tentative step toward locating a universal language—a visual equivalent of music. Finally, there is a full-blown recognition of Wallace's intimate, if intuitive, apprehension of his own genealogy.

A fascination with the dialectic of mythologizing and demythologizing objects and actions persists among the "community" of pieces in the Ferus show. *Homage to Hesse*, the earliest of the sculptural works, has a purely formal, nonliterary presence that makes it unique in Berman's oeuvre. In the rest of the works, the literary content expands significantly. There are 12 or 13 untitled pieces of identical size: Hebrew characters in chance arrangements written on paper carefully treated to evoke antiquity. Wallace had worked on one large sheet of paper, tearing apart each fragment and mounting it on a stretched canvas. Twenty-two pieces had been planned; the series was abandoned at the halfway mark.

Of the most significant works in the exhibition, *The Panel* visually documents the radical transition in Berman's work. Collaged to the outside of a cabinet door hinged onto the central panel is the fragment of a drawing, the last appearance of the earlier illustrative style; on the reverse of that same door is a large number 12. The door opens not onto a contained space, but onto another door of sorts, really a large panel. A small box with a hinged door has collaged on it a fragment of a letter from the artist; behind that door is a mirror, and beside that, a fragment of paper with Hebrew calligraphy. Beneath this is an elliptical hunk of wood, oddly marred and carved deeply with a cross. The whole, housed in a rough-hewn box frame, is a complex game of identities lost and found, of paradoxes and tautologies, of secret messages.

Berman anticipated the possibility of scandal in connection with the Ferus show, predicting privately that it might stem from public reaction to the assemblage *Cross*. The visit from the vice squad was made in response to a complaint registered with the Los Angeles Police Department by an anonymous caller. And as there had been advance warning of the

Wallace Berman, *Homage to Hermann Hesse*, 1954, wood, 19⅝ x 21 x 17⅝"

Wallace Berman, *Untitled*, 1956–57, wood stain on parchment on canvas, 20 x 20"

visitation, a small crowd had assembled at the Ferus on the morning of June 27th.

The officers cruised the gallery, having trouble locating the offending object: they passed *Cross* several times without seeing it at all. By then the tension and anticipation had become unbearable, if comical. The story goes that Ed Kienholz (partner in the Ferus with Walter Hopps) decided to expedite matters by approaching the tableau called *Temple* and uncovering its partially hidden reproduction from *Semina 1* of a drawing by the artist Cameron.

Kienholz inquired whether this drawing was the item that they might be looking for. Well, I guess it must be, they said. So the copy of *Semina* on the floor of *Temple* was confiscated. Berman, as its publisher, was served with papers, arrested, and taken to Lincoln Heights to spend two nights in the can. The trial, ironically, was presided over by the judge who had tried the obscenity case against Henry Miller. Unfortunately, the issues at stake were not exploited in a way that might have achieved any moral or legal victories for the artist. Cameron, who had done the drawing in question, was not on trial, and, at the time, preferred, for compelling personal reasons, not to use the opportunity to make a political statement regarding her art. So constitutional issues were never seriously engaged and the trial ended, Wallace having been for the most part silent, entrapped by his own sense of impotence. When asked by the judge if he had anything to say before the pronouncement of verdict and sentence, Wallace approached the courtroom blackboard and quietly wrote, "There is no justice. Only revenge." The magistrate announced "Guilty as charged" and levied a fine of $150. A friend, the actor Dean Stockwell, paid the fine, and Wallace was released. The show at the Ferus did not reopen.

The months between the June bust and the end of the year were governed by anger and the specter of paranoia, then a slowly spreading bile, a bitterness. It occurred to Wallace, I believe, that morality was relative. Although it had been his intention to establish a point of view which could protect him from the perversions of politically and economically biased ethics, his self-constructed morality had been a "reasoned" system, evidently too idealistic to be useful when "the curtain dropped heaviest." A new strategy seemed to be called for: the artist must conduct the revolution in a way that precludes the agents of control from co-opting and defusing it by turning it into mass entertainment. It means staying underground, and it means locating sympathizers. If you recognize yourself as one of us, nod quietly and arm yourself. As Burroughs says, "It is a long trip. We are the only riders."

Semina 2, produced at Crater Lane from July to December of 1957, reads like an anthology of jeremiads. Berman's editorial choices reflect his awareness of the need to shift courses to avoid the "past prerecording [his] 'future.'" For the first time, the vision of artist as martyr appears. The entry "Patience" by Paul Eluard is indicative:

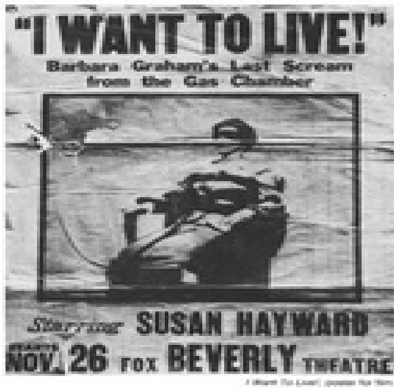
You are my patient women my patient my parent
Throat high suspended organ of slow night
Reverence hiding all skies in its grace
Prepare for vengeance a bed from which I shall be born.

There is also a recurrence, if one wishes to call it that, of "junkie" imagery. There had always been, and would always be, friends of Wallace's strung out on the "junk" trip. Wallace never involved himself except as a repelled, if fascinated, spectator. The junkie, however, became one incarnation of the Victim, a leitmotif which appears with increasing frequency in his work, both visual and literary. Again from *Semina 2*, Wallace writing as Pantale Xantos:

> A face raped by innumerable
> messiahs places into sodden c
> otton an anxious needle
> A face hisses rules to cathedr
> als and prepares for the narco
> myth.

On the final page, we find the epigram "ART IS LOVE IS GOD," which Wallace had used on the announcement for the Ferus exhibition: some six months later it appeared resonating dark and ironic harmonics.

The second issue of *Semina* was assembled and distributed from San Francisco. On the back cover appears a brief description of Berman's arrest and trial which announces plans for a self-imposed "exile": "I will continue to print 'Semina' from locations other than this city of degenerate angels." During this period of voluntary exile spent in Northern California (December 1957–May 1961), the Bermans lived in the Fillmore district of San Francisco, then in a house on the Corte Madera Creek in Larkspur, Marin

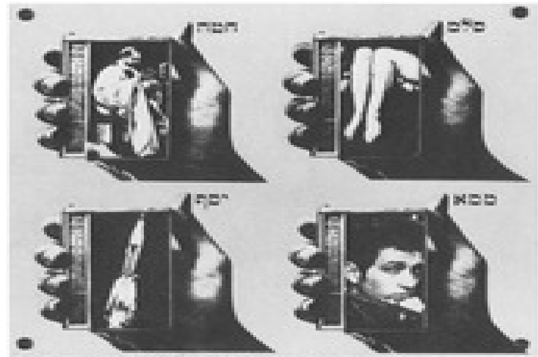


I Want To Live!, poster for film.

Wallace Berman, Radio/Aether Rock, 1974, rock and black chain with acrylic paint, 6 x 13 x 13".

Wallace Berman, cover for Semina 7: ALEPH a gesture involving photographs, drawings & text, 1961, 200 copies.

County. San Francisco—North Beach in particular—was just entering a year of most frenetic activity. The Bay Area had been, since the early '20s, a forge for political and esthetic avant-gardes. San Francisco tended to display a greater tolerance than Los Angeles for its bohemian population, although by 1958 media hype and rampant social psychosis began to destroy the viability of the community.



Wallace Berman, Sound, 1967-68, verifax and acrylic, 12½ x 13½".

But in 1957 and early 1958 a younger sort of American inundated the Bay Area. If many seemed unable to find footholds, they were open to experiencing life without prejudice or reservation. And among them were a few important minds, with strong visions of the future. With few exceptions, the artists and poets who had a personal significance in Wallace's life seem to share, in equal degree, his own obscurity. Perhaps best known among them would be the poet Robert Duncan, the poet-playwright Michael McClure, the artists Bruce Conner and Jess, the poet David Meltzer, the photographer Patricia Jordan and the filmmaker Larry Jordan. Two others need special mention. Jay De Feo, an important and neglected painter, is possibly the only individual to match the fusion and confusion of art and life that Wallace accomplished. Wallace's series of nine photographs of De Feo captured her delicate balance of open-hearted vulnerability and enigmatic strength.

Then, one would have to talk about the poet John Wieners. There truly is a region where poetry and conversation re-merge into an undifferentiated swarm of words, and some men do inhabit it. "*The real one of many, the illusory far and near intersect to push behavior's stream, dependent on questing, producing revelatory postures of men, animals and stars.*'" So said John, and so he was, living in an upstairs room in Wallace's house on Scott Street. Wallace gently cared for John, precisely, as John saw, because of their mutual need, indeed their mutual gift, for "realizing quality out of strangeness.'"

Berman spent a lot of his time in San Francisco out on the streets. Three issues of *Semina* were published in San Francisco, the last being number five (1959-1960). *Semina 3* (1958) was entirely Michael McClure's "Peyote Poem." *Semina 4* (1959) includes a fair sampling of poets making the North Beach scene, work by some members of the Los Angeles contingent and samples of Yeats, William S. Burroughs, Blake and Allen Ginsberg. The Berman's San Francisco household would become a crashpad, a "shooting gallery," a rendezvous for acquaintances and total strangers whose meanderings in and out made serious work at home impossible. The original demography of North Beach—a solid, ethnic, working-class neighborhood—had been superseded by a transient population of artists and pseudo-hipsters and, from Wallace's point of view, it had turned into an "artists' colony": "They terrify me, like tract houses. . . . Everyone doing the same thing." Berman, however, had become a local celebrity on the Beach; a 1958 *Look* magazine article featured Wallace as the North Beach "poet-maker."

Late summer 1960 through spring 1961 was spent in Larkspur, in Mill Valley, in hopeful retreat from the attentions and pressures of the city. Again, a small coterie began to develop around Wallace. There was initially some encouragement on that score, with Wallace opening an art gallery of sorts in an abandoned, roofless houseboat, where exhibitions and performances were held. *Semina VI* (sic), "The Clown," a long poem by David Meltzer, came out in 1960 as planned. Wallace says in a letter at this time "im in a corner don't want to move dont want to hang up landlady shes as beat as we are—been pasting up Seminas like demented but this is only day to day loot." In spite of extreme economic pressures, the Larkspur contingent held ground in high spirits for many months before a pall of *déjà vu* descended. North Beach had come to the attention of the city political machine; resultant police crackdowns fostered overt hostility. Rents in the suddenly fashionable section inflated to the point where its most recent habitués could no longer afford to live there. An epidemic of narcotics abuse (particularly involving methedrine) turned a formerly creative community into an open-air freak show. Gray Line tour buses lined the curbs to get a closer look.

The gradual dispersion eventually brought refugees to Berman's door, and the media followed. In an article which appeared in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1961, Wallace touched on another source of his ballooning discomfort: " 'Look Tosh,' he said, pointing east along the shore, 'that's San Quentin. That's where the State burned [Caryl] Chessman.' " The Victim reappeared as the operative image in *Semina 7* (1961), Wallace's personal vehicle ("*Aleph*/ a gesture involving photographs drawings & text by Wallace Berman"). The cover image, in reference to the recent Chessman execution, makes use of an old poster for the premiere of Susan Hayward in the 1958 movie *I Want To Live*. The face of the image has literally been "rubbed out," rendered anonymous and given over to the viewer as his victimized counterpart. The gesture anticipated a series of later pieces (1963–64) in which Wallace "rubbed out" the faces of rows of portraits of prominent political figures. The contents of *Semina 7* seem elegiac in tone, echoing a restrained and tender sense of melancholy.

> BOXED CITY
>
> My beautiful wife
> Rearranges deaf photographs talks
> Rococo & dances off four walls
> Son Tosh pencils the faithful
> Image & ignores the subtle drama
>
> Stoned in black corduroy I continue
> To separate seeds
>   From the bulk.

> FAIRYTALE FOR TOSH
>
> The wolf is dead   The wolf is dead
> The wolf is dead   The wolf is dead
> The wolf is dead   The wolf is dead
> The wolf is dead   The wolf is dead
> The wolf is dead
>
>   The wolf is dead

In an eerie moment of clairvoyance, Wallace noted the following below a photographic nature morte with portraits of Cocteau and Nijinsky as double talismans:

> Spurred by what reason
> Do I leave this ark
> For the city of degenerate
> Angels' 500 miles south other than to die

In May of 1961, the Bermans moved back to Los Angeles, to Crater Lane. *Semina 8* was issued from there in 1963. *Semina 9* (1964) contained a single item, Michael McClure's "Dallas Poem." Sensing, I think, that between the public executions of Caryl Chessman and John Kennedy something larger had been killed in the minds of the American people, Wallace let a decade rest and with it the publication of *Semina*. When the Crater Lane house was destroyed in a landslide, in December 1964, much of the early work—drawings, photographs and negatives, sculptures—was lost. Topanga Canyon was the Bermans' new home and last move. In the years to follow, the need or desire for constant company abated and Wallace spent longer periods of time working alone. He acquired an 8mm Bolex camera and began shooting film again: "the camera for the first time feels 'rite'—like a brush or . . . . With 16 I was never comfortable—now find great excitement . . . ."

The Verifax collages made between 1964 and 1976 represent the most cohesive body of works within Berman's surviving oeuvre, the artist's vital apprehension of language as a system for containing and manipulating meaning. Originally, a small Sony television pictured in a magazine advertisement provided Wallace with his central icon. Onto its screen he collaged a series of single or combined images, either "found" photographs or images that he shot, developed and printed himself. After a period of experimentation, he abandoned the television unit as too small, awkward, and lacking the essential element of music. In its place appeared a hand holding a small transistor radio, again taken from a print media source. The speaker panel became "screen" onto which were projected the vocabulary of pictographs which Wallace began to develop. The Verifax machine, whose grainy sepia tonalities can be altered by spiking the developing chemicals and manipulating exposure times, fused the collaged images into one undifferentiated image-object comparable to the Surrealist concept of the word-as-object. In juxtaposition, the combines become poémes concrètes.

Thus, in the Verifaxes, the perceptual act is equated with reading and its mental corollary, interpretation. The images, in fact, are composed in the manner of words placed on a page. Berman's conception of "ground" akin to Mallarmé's concept of the area of the page as "a void of meaning upon which, into which, in which the poem appears." The radios, fit snugly into the palms of the hands, sit schematically on the "page"; they evoke the conjuror's gesticulation or the presentation of the Tarot cards dealt for those awaiting a glimpse of their future. Further, these works are best considered as one extended "book," and not only "book" in the literary sense, but also in the jazz musician's vernacular: that carefully guarded record of original works that documents a composer-performer's "sound," his mark of singular identity.

Indeed, music continued to exert a primary influence on Wallace from the early jazz drawings to the later Verifax pieces, some of which carry actual song titles: "*You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'*," "*Papa's Got a Brand New Bag*." What gradually evolves in the Verifax series is a complex substratum of associations between blues and bebop as modes of expression, and the modes of the hand-radio pieces.

The 12-bar blues, for example, is a virtually fixed form given life by the emotional investment in its content by the blues artist. Bebop, a content-conservative music, drew primarily on a reserve of standard popular tunes and swing riffs, retaining their intervallic character but changing register, key, tone and chord sequences, and hatching new rhythmic structures and timbres, thereby reinventing meaning entirely. Similarly, Wallace's inventions on repetitive formal structures and vernacular content allowed for the kind of wild improvisations that clarify the visual experience in much the same way that Charlie Parker had clarified the experiencing of sound.

If the pioneers of bebop had it in mind to reenergize Afro-American musical language, to reenergize the visual language of his particular experience of the world was a central objective of Berman's. Besides his affection for jazz and the blues, his natural affinity for the Symbolist and Surrealist poets is reflected in his decision to dismantle and restructure the conventions of illusionistic representation. In their place he developed a visual analogue to Reverdy's formula by which the poet proposed to "eliminate conventional syntax and punctuation, to have no linking words, no adjectives, and no adverbs, so that only the force of nouns clashing together would be left."[20] Jonathan Swift seems to be the father of them all, for in Book Three of *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift suggests that language be dragged one step beyond even that, simply by eliminating nouns entirely. Communications could then proceed by holding up actual objects. Wallace, it seems, has given us a kind of lexicon for the Swiftian cosmos.

William Burroughs, the most recent heir to these linguistic experiments (via Gertrude Stein, Tristan Tzara, James Joyce), has pushed them even further than his predecessors. Berman's work has a profound resemblance to that of Burroughs, particularly its conceptual and formal frameworks and the author's interests in the state of "total freedom." In both "Sound" and "Silent" series, Berman identified through independent means with a philosophy that Burroughs has termed "factualism"—an impersonal, nonjudgmental vision which eliminates the concept of "taste" as instrumental in the creative process.

> All arguments, all nonsensical condemnations as to what people "should do" are irrelevant. Ultimately there is only fact on all levels, and the more one argues, verbalizes, moralizes, the less he will see and feel of fact. Needless to say I will not write any formal statement on the subject. Talk is incompatible with factualism.

The transactional nature of gambling as an activity—the specific functions, within it, of shuffling and dealing—reappear in the Verifax works as a methodology that is a counterpart to Burroughs' "cut-up" methods. Both serve the purpose of desentimentalizing images. Through the shuffling of "association blocks," unidentified, therefore uncontrolled, content reveals itself, and submerged meanings surface.

The image of the radio speaker/screen alludes to a wilderness of tangent symbols: a doorway; a window; certainly a mirror, that object representing the interface between the world as we experience it and the strange territory of "reversed reason," of deceptions and madness. In row upon row of the hand/radio aggregates, Wallace juxtaposes fragments from a variety of sources, combining and recombining them in no particular sequential order, without a dominant or centralizing idea. There is no prescribed technique for "reading" or "scanning" the pieces. We can only become an accomplice in the constant flashing of pictographs on our retinal "screen"—images in focus and those within peripheral view crystallizing in constantly shifting vistas shrouded in an "atmosphere of conflicting particles" reminiscent of the proto-Imagist poetry of Baudelaire and Poe. This also recalls Burroughs' methods of assembling a vast range of disconnected, unintegrated images into "assorted blocks," accompanied by injunctions to "shift coordinate points."[21]

The effect is cinematic: we are asked to conceptualize time, to submit to sensations of expansion and compression, of nonlinearity, of swirling, shifting points of view, out of which emerge the awareness of a "conspiracy" of objects and events, an active sur-reality. The viewer is inclined to surrender distinctions between fantasy and reality. Meanings emerge as the viewer becomes involved in a series of rapid transformations in which space and time become shadows thrown across an imaginary screen, projections of a language perceived in the movements of its own creation.

This total body of work Wallace designated with the title *Radio-Aether*. Aether, that all-pervading, infinitely elastic, massless medium that was formerly postulated as the medium of propagation for electromagnetic waves, is also known, in tradition, as the heavenly space beyond earth's atmosphere, the spiritual realm. The activation of the aether metaphor in conjunction with the radio icon sets up additional implications. Like Charles Olson's poems, constructed, or "scored" as a "field" of work-objects acting as conduits in the transferring and transforming of energy, Berman's multiple-image Verifaxes are fields of energy; each image, like every substance in nature, is endowed with a characteristic set of resonant frequencies at which it vibrates or oscillates.

What becomes apparent here is that the radio image, like the original image of the television, is less important for its objecthood than for its implied potential for transformation. This brings us full circle to what is perhaps the central issue of Berman's work, namely the issue of control. In "the invisible generation," an essay appended to *The Ticket That Exploded*, Burroughs reminds us that "what we see is determined to a large extent by what we hear." It is a terrifying "given" that media—particularly the mesmerizing qualities of electronic media—can corrupt language and control minds. We have only to be reminded of the Volksempfanger, the radio built at low cost in large quantities, and put on the market in Germany, trademarked "VE301," in memory of Hitler's seizure of power on January 30, 1933. Regarded as a "political instrument," it had been engineered so that "only the nearest local station could be received."[22] With full comprehension of their implications, Berman used these symbols of potential control and corruption in ways that would eliminate conditioned responses and open up channels for "Total Communication."

Around 1972 Wallace again began to make three-dimensional objects—wooden boxes with windowlike faces, filled by water-smoothed stones and emblazoned with Hebrew characters. There were boulders—Wallace titled one *Seed*—simply endowed with Hebrew letters arranged in "paragraphs," according to choice (and Chance). There were smaller rocks wrapped in chain and displayed like treasured specimens on pedestals; one has a title plate which reads "OF THE RADIO/AETHER." Works were done *in situ*: a white wall behind Wallace's Topanga home painted with Talmudic care, a few calligraphic characters on the face of the chimney of Topanga's Mermaid Tavern. Or a cryptic message affixed to a boulder—part of a jetty in Ventura County. Wallace chose that location with great care: the ocean-end of a road of rocks. This particular boulder saw light at low tide; at high tide, it spoke its strange cabala to a dark and watery world. With perfect and inevitable freedom, over a period of years, the message has worn off and rejoined the aether.

Wallace Berman has been credited with being the originator of the Assemblage movement in California,[23] although that, in the long run, may obscure his more central role as well as cheating future speculators out of some very fertile territory. It seems more useful to consider, more broadly, that Berman's closest affinities are with Baudelaire and Rimbaud, with Marcel Duchamp, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, and with the likes of Jim Morrison, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, Brian Eno, and David Bowie—artists who have used rock-and-roll as a readymade language.

At any rate, the distinguishing property of each of these individuals—Berman among them—is a kind of transparency. Possibly one could think of each as being possessed of "a will favorable to hazard," a phrase conjured by Max Ernst in *Beyond Painting* and to which he appended Hume's definition of hazard: "The equivalence of ignorance in which we find ourselves in relation to the real cause of events." It is precisely this quality of transparency (certainly a kind of "ignorance" Wallace comprehended when he told a friend that he identified himself with The Fool's card in the Tarot deck) which allows each artist to incarnate or occupy, rather than simply to exemplify, his particular set of coordinate points in human history.

The artist's strategy in each case is based on the proposition that for all intents and purposes, the human being is a transparent network of transformers and transmitters occupied with collecting and systematizing content. Implicit in this system is the moment of fulfillment, illumination or enlightenment, which is a metaphor for a knowledge at once abstract and concrete, universal and personal, secreted and apocalyptic. It is important because of, rather than in spite of, its paradoxical nature.

Rimbaud and Burroughs experienced "illumination" after deliberate, relentless attempts at brutalizing their native sensibilities, an obsessively morbid process in which victimizer and victim share absolute identity. Samuel Beckett's work is preoccupied with the state of entrapment and the inability of the entrapped to make the decision to take action. Transformation is eternally delayed and "illumination" takes

on a dumbly literal meaning.[25]

Of course, it is Duchamp, with his transparent networks of containers, delays, illuminants, who most gracefully and systematically employed these archetypal metaphors. Indeed, Berman and Duchamp are much alike. Both loved to play jokes on the viewer/voyeur by drawing his attention to something "there" to indicate the "not there," just as often drawing attention to the "not there," while begging the question of whether the "not there" was "there" in fact! Berman apparently began to take pleasure in the fact that certain of his earlier works (e.g. *The Panel* and *Temple*) existed for future viewers only as photographs. Friend and artist Russell Tamblyn has remarked that Wallace, at certain points, seemed almost to be making pieces just in order to photograph them. This gives one a sense of Wallace's methodical madness with regard to history.

> If someone will explain Chinese
> perspective to me—I will elaborate
> on the Choctaw & Cherokee blood
> in Jack Dempsey.
> For John Birch & Karl Marx
> P. Xantos
> Embarcadero, 1969[26]

Further, Berman and Duchamp acted both as patient and doctor, and during a life of operations performed on their own unanesthesized selves, succeeded in practicing what they preached. Thus, in the process of making art about illumination and transformation, they were themselves illuminated and transformed. If there is the paradoxical concurrence of a wonderful, honest narcissism and a remote, dispassionate selflessness about their works, it simply attests to their respective abilities to "work both sides of the fence." Finally, though, Berman operated on the understanding that his own particular power could not be touched directly, although its essential energy, somewhat translated, could be perceived at some remove. Ultimately Wallace (Pantale Xantos and Marcia Jacobs included) lived in another part of the same nebulae inhabited by Duchamp (and Rrose Sélavy): "in that mist behind the glass."[26]

History is fiction, as Burroughs remarks. It is made up of discrete vessels of content, their manipulation being a game whose object is to reinvent history on one's own terms. It is a high-risk game, there being more than a very good chance of losing self, of being occupied rather than occupying one's human container. However, if one is a master, one could gain sufficient power and enough control to "cut the enemy off [one's] line," the enemy "who exists only where no life is."[27] The victor thusly recaptures mystery and reinstates life.

Unhappily, this article comes after the death of Wallace Berman on February 18, 1976—early on the morning of his fiftieth birthday—from injuries sustained in an auto accident near his Topanga Canyon home. ■

Wallace Berman, *Shuffle*, 1969, verifax collage with acrylic on paper, 13 x 14".

A portion of the research for this article was supported by a Youthgrant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

1. Interview with Shirley Berman, November 17, 1977, Topanga, Calif.
2. Marcel Duchamp, quoted by Robert Lebel in [illegible], ed. André Breton and Gérard Legrand, Paris, p. 98.
3. David Meltzer, *Ragas*, San Francisco, 1959.
4. Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," reprinted in Donald M. Allen, ed., *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 1974, p. xiv.

> Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! . . . One of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity. . . . It was founded by me . . . on a day in which I was in love with someone. . . . I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to, I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. . . . The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it.

5. Ibid., p. xiv.

> How can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. . . . Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them.

6. Letter, undated, to Zack Walsh.
7. Letter, dated March 31, 1961, to Zack Walsh.
8. Interview with Richard Ruben, April 18, 1977, New York.
9. Joseph C. Goulden, *The Best Years 1945-50*, New York, 1976, pp. 47-48.
10. Interview with Robert Alexander, January 26, 1977, Venice, Calif.
11. Interview with Dion Vigne, June 20, 1977, San Francisco, Calif.
12. Letter, undated, to Zack Walsh.
13. Letter dated January 28, 1965, to Larry and Patricia Jordan. Reference to *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*, ed. Romola Nijinsky, New York, 1936.
14. Robert Lebel, "Marcel Duchamp and André Breton," in *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, New York, 1973, p. 137.
15. John Wieners, *Selected Poems*, New York, 1972, p. 5.
16. Larry Schneider, "Simple Life, No False Values in House Boat," *San Francisco Examiner*, day unknown, 1967.
17. Letter, September 15, 1965, to Zack Walsh.
18. Letter, January 28, 1965, to Larry and Patricia Jordan.
19. Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination*, The Hague, 1966, p. 58, cited by John Vernon in *The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture*, Urbana, Ill., 1973, p. 101.
20. Burroughs in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, cited by John Tytell in *Naked Angels: The Lives & Literature of the Beat Generation*, New York, 1977, p. 112.
21. William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, New York, 1964, pp. 32-35.
22. The catalogue of Edward Kienholz's recent "Volksempfänger" series at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, 1977, quotes the Nazi radio law of September 7, 1939:

> 1. It is prohibited to listen intentionally to foreign stations. Violators will be jailed or, if the case requires, imprisoned with hard labour.
> 2. Anybody who deliberately spreads or publicizes news transmitted by foreign stations and which are of a nature to jeopardize the power of resistance of the German people, will be sentenced to hard prison, or, if the case requires, to death.

23. John Coplans, "Circles of Style on the West Coast," *Art in America*, June 1964.
24. In "Play" (1963), for instance, Beckett gives the following stage directions:

> Front centre, touching one another, three identical grey urns. . . . From each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth. . . . They face undeviatingly front throughout the play. Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns. But no masks. Their speech is provoked by a spotlight projected on faces alone. . . . The source of light is single and must not be situated outside ideal space (stage) occupied by its victims.

Samuel Beckett, "Play," in his *Cascando and Other Short Dramatic Pieces*, New York, 1967, pp. 45, 62.

25. Text from *Semina 7*.
26. Letter dated October 6, 1964, from Duchamp to André Breton, in *Marchand du Sel*, p. 164, cited by Anne d'Harnoncourt in her introduction to *Marcel Duchamp*, (Note 14), pp. 40-44; d'Harnoncourt's translation.
27. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (Note 21), p. 14.

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